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American transcendental vision: Emerson to Chaplin

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AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTAL VISION:
EMERSON TO CHAPLIN

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson's publication of *Nature* in 1836 began a process of creating a new condition of American thinking, severed from European cultural and intellectual influences. The subsequent lectures *The American Scholar* and *The Divinity School Address* furthered this process, calling for an original American literature. Emerson's writing called consistently for poets with the ability to "see" past the material, apparent world to the world of eternal forms, which shaped nature in accordance with a divine moral imperative. Through this connection, man-as-poet would discover God in himself. In short, Emerson effectively transferred divinity from Unitarian doctrine to the individual, thereby asserting each individual as the center of his own moral universe.

Emerson's prose utilizes visual metaphors to express ideas which escape conventional language usage. The poet, according to Emerson, would have the ability to trace *words* back to their original associations with *things*, and thus reveal the true world of facts. His emphasis on seeing (in all aspects of that term) dominates Emerson's writing and determines an aesthetic which is as much visual as it is verbal.

Emerson's theories found disciples in Thoreau and Whitman, but the most interesting extension of his aesthetic came with the development of the motion picture. In the early twentieth century, D. W. Griffith singlehandedly changed the status of films from sideshow amusements to narrative art. Griffith's techniques for creating visual narrative were intuitive and inspired from his imagination, an essential quality of the Emersonian poet. Griffith's own moral imperative was similar to Emerson's; he envisioned a medium which could educate more effectively than language.

Charles Chaplin was, from 1920 through 1936, the most recognizable figure in the world because of his unique screen comedies. Chaplin's enduring character, the Tramp, evokes much of Emerson's qualities of the poet in that he envisioned the world beyond the apparent, and creatively reconstituted this world in the way Emerson had done with visual metaphor. Chaplin combined the humanism of Emerson with the democratic possibilities of Whitman to create a uniquely American cinema with universal appeal. Chaplin's body of work remains America's most logical extension of Emersonian philosophy.

Introduction

Transcendental Visions, 1836 - 1936

“What we are, that only can we see.” –Emerson, Nature

“The problem that confronts us in dealing with Emerson,” writes F. O. Matthiessen, “is the hardest we shall have to meet, because of his inveterate habit of stating things in opposites.”¹ This is a condition of Emerson’s prose style of which he himself was aware. He writes, in *Representative Men*, “The world still wants its poet-priest, a reconciler who shall not trifle, with Shakspeare the player, nor shall grope in graves, with Swedenborg the mourner, but who shall see, speak, and act, with equal inspiration.”² In fact, Emerson spent a lot of time and mental energy on the distinction between words and things, between form and content, and between intuition and intellect. In this condition of thinking and writing, Emerson seems to be trying to write about ideas not expressible through language. He is not trying to express any *particular* idea, necessarily, which escapes language, but rather to discover a reconciliation in terms of *form*, some method that will allow for such a reconciliation. If such an aesthetic can be determined, then all the questions we seek answers for will no longer need to be asked. Emerson seems to express this condition of language most often in terms of visual metaphors. Emerson’s habit of stating things in opposites, that Matthiessen finds troubling, has a positive aspect: what Emerson reveals in opposing visual terms about his attitudes, and about his expectations, for the poet-priest who might yet be able to solve this problem.

Emerson’s expression of opposites in visual terms allows for the image, rather than the word, to take precedence in terms of meaning. The most often used form of Emerson’s visual metaphor will present opposing ideas in visual terms, granting the juxtaposition of images to be worked

upon by the imagination, which is, in itself, a component of Emerson's ongoing philosophy. Or, he may create the image of the impossible, the image that cannot not be imaged, such as the well-known "transparent eye-ball" passage in *Nature*. In this instance, Emerson simply restates the original problem Matthiessen observes: he describes a visual image which cannot be imagined. Still, as prevalent as the visual image is in Emerson's writing, he must rely on language to do the actual work. What is lacking, in a sense, is a mechanism for translating language into image.

Matthiessen reminds us that "concerned as he was with every possibility of *seeing*, Emerson was fascinated with the developing art of photography from the time of the invention of the daguerreotype in the late eighteen-thirties. He conceived of the camera as a powerful symbol for his age's scrutiny of character."³ Emerson used seemingly every available term to describe seeing, the process of seeing, the processes of perception, insight, the action of the eye itself, the subject doing the seeing, and the object being seen, all in a way to integrate the visual with the intuitive, a marriage he believed would revitalize the connection between man and nature (the God in man). Charles Feidelson reminds us that Emerson's interest is in "Man Seeing, the mind engaged in a crucial act of knowledge."⁴ The term "veil" occurs often throughout Emerson's writing (as it does in Hawthorne's; it is perhaps important to remember that Holgrave, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, is a daguerrotypist), and seeing through the veil was the act Emerson most esteemed. To do so, one must have clarity and precision of vision, an intuitive sense for recognizing the eternal forms of nature imprinted on the "veil," and the power of the symbol in order to make the eternal forms, the beauty and truth of nature, new to the world, to "create a new thing in nature." Emerson confirms, in a sense, what Melville's Ahab most fears - - that to

reach through to the *truth* one must “strike through the mask”; the fear is that “there’s nought beyond.” The only possibility worse than a false God is the realization of no God at all.

Whitman, who was “simmering, until Emerson brought [him] to a boil,” extended somewhat, at least in form, Emerson’s visual project. Though Whitman was more interested in what he was seeing than in the way he was seeing it, he nonetheless begins the “great montage project” Sergei Eisenstein refers to; certainly many of Whitman’s verse poems have a visual component. In some, such as “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” or “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim,” it is possible, almost irresistible, to annotate the text with camera setups, movements, and transitions. If Emerson would have made an excellent cinema critic, Whitman would have made an excellent documentary filmmaker.⁵

Emerson’s interest in vision was not entirely original; as with most of his thought, it was directly inspired by other thinkers. Principally, in terms of vision, his touchstone was Emanuel Swedenborg, whose ideas he acquired through the work of Boston divinity student Sampson Reed. The opening chapter of this work examines Sampson Reed, his Swedenborgianism, and Emerson’s crucial first encounter with Reed and with Swedenborg’s work. As Bliss Perry notes, Emerson “owed far more to Swedenborg than he ever confessed.”⁶

Emerson’s first encounter with Reed came in hearing him lecture in 1821, a copy of which Emerson attained and kept “like a treasure.” Emerson was not aware at the time that, because of the Unitarian mistrust of mysticism, Reed’s oration was an elaboration of Swedenborgian ideals without the mention of Swedenborg’s name. Thus, Emerson was motivated to encourage a friendship with Reed, which furthered Emerson’s interest in the works of Swedenborg, and in Reed’s interpretation of them. In fact, it is my belief that Reed’s book *Observations on the*

Growth of the Mind was as critical an influence on Emerson as anything else he had encountered before composing *Nature*, Coleridge included.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four examine Emerson's emergence as a theological presence in New England, his gradual withdrawal from the Unitarian ministry, and his eventual status as a man of letters at the center of New England's cultural and intellectual revolution. Emerson began to establish himself as a setter of intellectual precedents in New England. *Nature* had a galvanic effect upon its release, especially upon the Harvard Divinity School and the perpetually flustered Andrews Norton. Emerson's 1838 lecture *The American Scholar* called for a new breed of uniquely American scholarship of American ideals, thus severing ties from the European influence on New England intelligentsia; his "Divinity School Address" separated the New England imagination from the weight of its Puritan heritage, and encouraged the free exploration of the individual into the workings, and ineffable mysteries, of nature. While Oliver Wendell Holmes called *The American Scholar* "our Intellectual Declaration of Independence,"⁷ Andrews Norton denounced "The Divinity School Address" as "the latest form of infidelity."⁸ (Emerson would later refer to Norton as the "Unitarian Pope.") Emerson's influence extended beyond the brief Transcendentalist Movement, through Margaret Fuller, Thoreau, Hawthorne (a resident at Brook Farm), and Melville (who, in a letter to Hawthorne, admitted that "this *all* feeling, though, there is some truth in"), and perhaps took its firmest root in Whitman.

Emerson realized that expression was an inherent component of the human condition. He states in "The Poet," "All men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression."⁹ Chapter Five deals with Emerson's demands for the

ideal poet and his theories of poetry. It is in this regard that Emerson began to develop an aesthetic that was both poetic and visual. Emerson saw in photography a way to reproduce the image of the world, a reproduction that bypassed language and avoided the ontological contradiction of trying to express in language an idea (or vision) that *escapes* language. Photography offered a verisimilitude of the world, and a chance to *record*, or make a record *of*, experience. What was lacking, though, was vitality of movement. The photograph is cropped, or framed (in a sense) as a painting is framed. An ideal instrument, one would imagine, for Emerson would be one that could record the motion of the world and express itself through its motion. I do not intend to argue that Emerson foresaw, or predicted in any way, the motion picture; to do so would be absurd. However, the motion picture camera offered a view of, and a presentation of, the world for which Emerson could only have hoped; in this work I intend to demonstrate that reading Emerson in this light reveals a unique condition of early American film, as well as provides an insight into the condition of Emerson's thinking on aesthetics. "Genius always looks forward," Emerson stated in *The American Scholar*. "The eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead. Man hopes. Genius creates. To create, - - to create, - - is the proof of a divine presence."¹⁰

Chapter Six follows a natural extension of Emerson's aesthetic sense into the realm of motion pictures. André Bazin, who remains one of the medium's greatest theorists, describes the inevitability of motion pictures:

The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time.¹¹

The motion picture evolved at the confluence of desire to reproduce the world accurately, and the technological advances which made this possible. Early films simply recorded whatever occurred in front of the camera, in the length of time it took for the film reel in the camera to pass through. There was no editing, no thought given to *mise-en-scène*, or to narrative. The attraction of motion was enough to secure the early motion picture a profitable existence in the first decade of the twentieth century. Both Tom Gunning's *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) and Lary May's *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) are indispensable books about this era of the social and economic forces at work on the motion picture, which struggled to gain legitimacy as an art form. Noël Carroll writes that

early film suffered what might be called “the anxiety of photography.” That is, because film is a product of photography and photography cannot be art, then film is not art. The reason for supposing that photography could not be art was that it was believed that photography could only slavishly reproduce reality. The task of silent filmmakers and theoreticians of the nascent art form was generally to refute these charges by showing that film need not slavishly reproduce reality; it could also creatively reconstitute it.¹²

Thus the most significant event in early film's history was David Wark Griffith's arrival at the Biograph Studios at 11 Fourteenth Street, New York; Griffith's background and early work is the focus of Chapter Seven.

Griffith, a stage actor versed in nineteenth-century melodrama, considered acting in films as a way to make money while awaiting legitimate work on the stage. But once Griffith got into the studio and observed the process of primitive filmmaking, he began to think of ways the stories could be improved, not only in content, but more significantly in the way they were presented on

the screen. Carroll's comment about the cinema creatively reconstituting the world is of utmost importance to thinking about early cinema, because this was Griffith's vision of the possibility of cinema, as well as Emerson's hope, and longing, for an Ideal Poet who could do this with language. Griffith seems to embody the Emersonian sentiment when he stated in 1914 that "the motion picture, although a growth of only a few years, is boundless in its scope and endless in its possibilities."¹³ Griffith innovated many techniques for improving the emotional effect of silent films, techniques which were to become inseparable from the medium itself as an art form, such as parallel editing, the close up, attention to *mise-en-scène*, as well as lighting and camera techniques. Griffith enabled the cinema to do, in a sense, what Emerson had hoped possible in language: he created an aesthetic by which the world could be creatively reconstituted. Griffith made visible Emerson's aspirations regarding language. Sergei Eisenstein, in his landmark (and in a sense creatively misleading) essay "Dickens, Griffith, and the Cinema Today" (1944), attributed Griffith's accomplishments in form to his working knowledge of Dickens. While Griffith was a devout reader of Dickens, as well as of Browning, Tennyson, Emerson, and Whitman, among others, what Griffith learned from *specifically* from Dickens was *technique*. The sense of gentility in his films, and the respect and importance placed on the home and the integrity of the family, were values of American Victorianism, of which Griffith was a product. He was a kind of populist as well; his favorite poet was Whitman, and Griffith could rattle off pages of verse from memory. Griffith envisioned the motion picture as a great educating tool, bringing moral lessons and values to the masses in a way that would be far more effective, and affecting, than books. After viewing Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* at the White House, President Woodrow Wilson is attributed as saying about motion pictures, "They teach history by lightning!"¹⁴ Griffith created

the rhythm of motion pictures, a lyrical feeling induced by his editing practices, which were immediately coopted by every director since. This, too, recalls Emerson, from “Poetry and Imagination”: “Let Poetry pass, if it will, into music and rhyme. That is the form which itself puts on. We do not enclose watches in wooden, but in crystal cases, and rhyme is the transparent frame that allows almost the pure architecture of thought to become visible to the mental eye.”¹⁵ And André Bazin comments, in an Emersonian sense, “A very faithful drawing may actually tell us more about the model but despite the promptings of our critical intelligence it will never have the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith.”¹⁶ This irrational power is precisely what Emerson wanted to achieve - - the dismissal of the intellect in favor of a pure intuitive experience of the world.

Chapter Eight looks closely at Griffith’s epic film *Intolerance*. Griffith had the practical and moral constitution to engage Emerson’s project, and his success was not lost on his favorite actress, Lillian Gish:

In the biblical episode [of *Intolerance*], the stone temples and narrow roads of Cana and Galilee, which Huck Wortman carefully recreated three miles west of the studio, were completely authentic. Nearly four decades after *Intolerance* was made, my sister Dorothy and I visited Jerusalem, and I experienced one of those strange moments of *déjà vu*. Then I realized that Mr. Griffith had built the city on a back lot in California. For the rest of the trip, as I passed the Garden of Olives and the Sorrowful Way, I kept expecting to see him, with floppy hat and megaphone, directing at the end of some dusty street.¹⁷

Griffith took his stories largely from literary sources. He claimed this was so because there were no writers suitable to the screen, no writers to fulfill the motion picture’s unique aesthetic possibilities: “Shakespeare belongs on the stage; and what of the screen? Must it be the step-child of literature, forever wearing remodelled garments, cut down and clumsily refilled from another

member of the same family?”¹⁸ However, though Griffith is valid in his claim, cinema’s first real authorial genius was by this time already working: Charles Spencer Chaplin.

Chaplin was himself a product of the nineteenth-century stage, though his stage was the English music hall. Chapter Nine examines Chaplin’s early stage career, his coming to America and introduction into motion pictures, and his early film career. His theatrical training was in the art of pantomime; as Lewis Jacobs writes, simply but thoroughly true, “whatever Chaplin touched became alive with meaning.”¹⁹ Though Chaplin had no formal education, he was extremely intelligent and had an intuitive sense about comedy and form; often, while working out bits of comedy “business” with his cast and crew, he would declare about a routine, “I know I’m right. I don’t know how I know I’m right, but I know that I am.” And he always was. He wrote in *My Autobiography*:

Although many worthwhile books have been written on the subject [of filmmaking], the trouble is that most of them impose the cinematic taste of the author. Such a book should be no more than a technical primer which teaches one to know the tools of the trade. Beyond that, the imaginative student should use his own art sense about dramatic effects. If the amateur is creative he needs only the barest technical essentials. To an artist complete freedom to do the unorthodox is usually most exciting.²⁰

Chaplin’s intuitive sense was impeccable. He fully realized in his work the Emersonian desire of the perception of essential forms. As Chaplin told Jean Cocteau in 1936, he felt that a film was like a tree; you shook it, and all that was loose and unnecessary fell away, leaving only the essential form.²¹

Chaplin directed his first short film for Mack Sennett at Keystone Studios in 1914. From that time forward, Chaplin tirelessly worked to learn his craft and to integrate his pantomime skill with the aesthetics of film. Also, perhaps most important, he created the initial version of his little

tramp character. In his earliest incarnations, the tramp was a comic device, with certain predetermined and predictable characteristics that other characters played off of. But, as Chaplin's career moved forward, and he became more and more popular, he began to invest the tramp with more of a personality of his own. Chaplin moved from Keystone, to Essanay Studios, to the Mutual Film Company, and to the First National Film Company, all the while revising his tramp, perfecting his art. During the First National period, in the late teens and early 1920s, the Tramp fully emerged as an alter ego of Chaplin himself.

Chapter Ten deals with the emergence of the Tramp as a distinct character with an identifiable screen personality. The Tramp had all of Chaplin's humanism, as well as his sometime acerbic (visual) wit and aversion to authority. Indeed, one of the most engaging of the Tramp's attributes is that he answers to a higher calling than civil order; he is willing, at the risk of his own safety or freedom, to act on impulses he feels to be morally right, even if illegal. The Tramp became a fully rounded, complete figure in films such as *The Immigrant*, *Easy Street*, *A Dog's Life*, *The Kid*, *The Gold Rush*, *The Circus*, *City Lights*, and *Modern Times*. The Tramp also began to take on attitudes of Chaplin's own growing social and political awareness.

Chapter Eleven looks closely at *Modern Times*, the Tramp's last film, and the reasons why this is so. Chaplin made *Modern Times* in 1936, nine years after the advent of sound in motion pictures, though he remained loyal to his Tramp, who, Chaplin was aware, could never speak. *Modern Times* would be the last Tramp film, and the film which most involves the Tramp as a historical character. André Bazin observes that

in most of his films Charlot has already made us laugh at his struggle with objects - - the shifty animosity of a ladder, of an alarm clock, of a staircase, and of a collapsible wall-bed. Against their hostility Charlot also used a spiritual trickery: he found uses for them different

from what fate had decreed. To disconcert, and thus abash the wickedness of the things, he pretended they were another kind of object. We have in *Modern Times* a residue of this technique when he proposes to the foreman to use the oil can as a scooper after having squashed it. But instead, the entire film should be considered a conflict between mankind and the objects he has created and which, on the scale of the History of Society, is sustained by machines. What had been simply the source of specific gags now becomes the general and moral theme of the entire film.²²

Bazin's insightful commentary contains an accurate summation of the Tramp's evolution. The objects that had once been props for gags have become more closely integrated with our lives. Appropriately, the Tramp's struggles become more and more complex as each film is made. However, in *Modern Times*, the objects are machines which outlast even the Tramp's ingenuity, and rather than continue what has been a losing fight against industrialization (in the bad sense) and the reduced status of the individual, the Tramp simply retires from the scene, remaining an individual, on his own path, to the end, off to continue Emerson's imperative in *Nature*, "Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"²³

Emerson's writing called consistently for poets with the ability to "see" past the material, apparent world to the world of eternal forms, which shaped nature in accordance with a divine moral imperative. Through this connection, man-as-poet would discover God in himself. In short, Emerson effectively transferred divinity from Unitarian doctrine to the individual, thereby asserting each individual as the center of his own moral universe. Emerson's prose utilizes visual metaphors to express ideas which escape conventional language usage. The poet, according to Emerson, would have the ability to trace *words* back to their original associations with *things*, and thus reveal the true world of facts. His emphasis on seeing (in all aspects of that term) dominates Emerson's writing and determines an aesthetic which is as much visual as it is verbal.

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3. Matthiessen, "Note on the Illustrations," *American Renaissance*, unpaginated.
4. Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 5
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Chapter 1

Sampson Reed: A Progenitor of

Transcendental Aesthetics

That Sampson Reed (1800-1880) had a significant influence on Emerson's work has now been generally accepted by scholars. Clarence Hotson in 1929 was the first critic to closely examine Reed's writings. He writes:

In literary history nothing is more interesting than to observe how surprising a result is frequently produced by the collection of scattered facts and the inferences to which they lead. While studying the relationship of Emanuel Swedenborg to Ralph Waldo Emerson, I have discovered incidentally a remarkable intellectual influence, hitherto little regarded, which a Swedenborgian friend of Emerson's had upon him. This friend, Sampson Reed, gave the first definite impulse which led to Emerson's literary career.¹

Kenneth Walter Cameron has probably done the most extensive work on Reed's influence on Emerson, perhaps the most valuable of which being his summaries of Reed's best known works, the address "Oration on Genius," delivered in 1821, and his book *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*, first published in 1826; this book went through nine American editions and three editions in England.² In Cameron's brief three-and-a-half page summary of *Growth of the Mind*, he cites twenty-seven passages which reappear, closely paraphrased, in Emerson's *Nature* (1836). And, the title of The Swedenborg Foundation's 1992 issue of *Swedenborg Studies* - - *Sampson Reed: Primary Source Material for Emerson Studies* - - is clear evidence of Reed's well deserved recognition in Emerson's life and work.

Still, while this influence on Emerson is acknowledged, and the extent of that influence has been traced in a general sense (meaning that scholars have been satisfied to locate passages in Reed that Emerson gleaned, both directly and implicitly), no one has as yet considered specific

ways in which Emerson's aesthetics may have been influenced, or better yet, formed, by his reading of Sampson Reed. While it is obvious that Emerson made prime use of Swedenborg's doctrine of "correspondences," that aspects of physical nature symbolize corresponding aspects of the soul, and thus of the divine mind, there has yet to be a study of Emerson's preference of sight as the primary means for experiencing these symbolic relationships. Scholars have, correctly, been careful to note that because of the Unitarian community's rejection of Swedenborgian doctrine, Sampson Reed, cautious of his standing in the community, was careful not to mention Swedenborg by name in the "Oration on Genius" or in *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*; in fact, Reed actually utilizes Swedenborg's theology to define a specific theory of aesthetics. Reed's work is clearly predisposed toward the importance of visual recognition (and cognition), and as in Emerson's work, "seeing" and related visual terms, becomes more complicated and multifaceted. As Emerson stated in an early lecture on English Literature in November 1835:

Every truth we can learn concerning our Ideas, we find some symbol for, in outward nature, before we can express it in words. . . . But this origin of all words that convey a spiritual meaning is only a small part of the fact. It is not words only that are emblematic. Every fact in outward nature answers to some state of the mind and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural fact as a picture.³

Emerson's emphasis on the presentation of image through language is essential to his significance as a writer and as a philosopher. Regarding Emerson's usage Jerome Loving writes that "Good writing . . . is a perpetual allegory representing man's connection with the Unseen. Only the poet, of course, is capable of this level of discourse - - which teaches us the emblematic character of the flux of the material world."⁴ Sampson Reed would bring these aesthetic elements - - language and vision - - and the unique capacity (or *responsibility*) of the poet, to Emerson at an important juncture in his career.

Sampson Reed remains, though, a rather obscure figure in nineteenth century American letters. A brief biographical sketch here of Reed's early career will, I believe, serve to place him in context with Emerson.⁵ Sampson Reed's path to the Unitarian pulpit seemed to lay clearly before him. He had been educated for his first fourteen years by his father, Dr. John Reed, a former Calvinist turned Unitarian who had served for more than fifty years as pastor of the First Church in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts. At fourteen, Sampson was enrolled at Harvard to begin undergraduate work and quickly distinguished himself as a scholar of great potential. His Harvard roommate was Thomas Worcester, who would become the key figure in Reed's spiritual life. Beginning in Reed's junior year at Harvard, Thomas Worcester's "principle employment was in reading [Swedenborg's] *Heavenly Doctrines* and in communicating a knowledge of them" to fellow students.⁶ Reed's son James writes that "during this time his religious opinions underwent a complete change, unless, indeed, it would more properly be said that they were then first definitely formed. He became a thorough believer in the doctrinal system propounded by Emanuel Swedenborg."⁷

Such was Harvard's (and the Unitarian) opinion of Swedenborg's writings at the time that the only books discovered to have been "banished" to the obscurity of an unused storage closet were the volumes of Swedenborg donated to the Harvard library⁸ many years earlier by the Reverend William Hill.⁹ Reed describes finding the volumes:

Upon my return to college, after I had begun to read Swedenborg, I went to the library the second time to see if I could find any of his works. The librarian looked into the catalogue again, and found the alcove and shelves where they ought to have been; but they were not there. Then we began a thorough search. We looked through the whole library, in place and out of place, but could not find them. Then we began to think of other rooms. At that time the library was in the second story of the west end of Harvard Hall. In the east end was a large room, called the "Philosophical Room." And between this room and the library

was a small room, which for the want of a proper name was called the “Museum.” It was filled with old rubbish, old curiosities, cast off, superseded, and obsolete philosophical apparatus, and so forth, all covered with dust. We could see no reason for hunting here, except that we had hunted everywhere else, without finding what we wanted.

There was a long table in the room. Upon it, and under it, were piles of useless articles; and beyond it were shelves against the wall, where various things were stored away. On the under shelf, as far out of sight as possible, I saw some books. I told the librarian, and he went round and worked his way until he got at them, and found that the large books were volumes of the *Arcana Cælestia*.¹⁰ There were also several works of Swedenborg, all of them covered with dust. I immediately got an order from President Kirkland, giving me authority to take the books and keep them in my room; and this I did for the rest of my college life. By what means or for what purposes these *Heavenly Doctrines* were cast out of the library of Harvard College must be left to conjecture. Of the 50,000 or 60,000 volumes then belonging to the library, these were the only ones treated in this manner. The fact seems to represent the state of the New Church at that time.¹¹

This example not only indicates Harvard’s attitude toward Swedenborgian doctrine, but also demonstrates the part that the chance finding of this “cast out . . . philosophical apparatus” (Reed would certainly think this Divine Providence) would have on the history of American letters.

Reed graduated from Harvard in 1818 and was admitted to the Divinity School at the encouragement of his father, who expected him to become a Unitarian minister. However, in 1820, Reed was formally admitted into the Boston New Church family. Worcester, four years his senior, had already graduated, and in 1821 the Boston New Church asked Worcester to become its pastor. Reed became immersed in Swedenborgian theology to the point of only doing that work required by the Divinity School’s obligations to maintain his standing in the program. However, Reed left the Divinity school before completing the program of study and relocated at Boston. He was asked to deliver the baccalaureate address to the 1821 Harvard graduating class, which included Ralph Waldo Emerson. Reed’s address, entitled “An Oration on Genius,” was well received; Sylvia Shaw notes that Reed “left Harvard with the applause of his audience ringing

in his ears,”¹² and, though Reed was careful not to mention Swedenborg by name in order to protect his standing at the school (as well as his future), the address contains a thinly veiled accounting of Swedenborg’s principal ideas. Shaw notes that “when [Reed] spoke to the class of 1821 on the subject of genius, by which he meant greatness, he delivered one of the most unusual speeches in American letters. It presented Swedenborgian theology in the clothing of Romanticism.”¹³ Perry Miller sets the scene:

It is not difficult to see why the speech so stirred Emerson and his contemporaries. It was the first admonitory indictment of formalism in the liberal church and pointed the way for an appeal from institutional legalities to a fresh and creative approach to nature; it insinuated that the first requirement would be a rejection of Locke. And then, it took as its subject “genius” - - with the implication that all who turned to nature would become geniuses. It excited the expectation of a new day, and it did so in an oracular, cryptic style, such as had not been heard in New England before, no accent of which was lost on the delighted eighteen-year-old Waldo Emerson.¹⁴

Indeed, the electrified Emerson borrowed the speech and made a copy, which he “kept as a treasure.”¹⁵

One theme of the “Oration” is the importance of reason; as Reed writes, “every man has a form of mind peculiar to himself,” but those with a “well-regulated” mind will experience the presence of God in nature.¹⁶ Reed makes the point that nature, and the spirit which animates nature, exist prior to laws, that “the laws according to which things exist, are from the things themselves, not the opposite.”¹⁷ Nature (*cause*) exists initially, and physical laws describing natural processes (*effect*) are applied later, by humans. The significance of this distinction is in its aesthetic implications. “There is a unison of spirit and nature,” Reed writes, but only those who have cast away self-love and ambition will recognize it: “The filthy and polluted mind *may* carve beauties from nature, with which it has no allegiance: the rose is blasted in the gathering.”¹⁸

Likewise, “the arts have been taken from nature by human invention; and, as the mind returns to its God, they are in a measure swallowed up in the source from which they came. . . . They are not arbitrary, having no foundation except in taste, which varies according to the state of the human mind.”¹⁹ For Reed, the arts have divine potential only when they occur with a spontaneity and a recognition of the harmony within itself; and, regarding the artist, “genius is divine, not when the man thinks that he is God, but when he acknowledges that his powers are from God. Here is the link of the finite with the infinite, of the divine with the human.”²⁰

In the “Oration” Reed treats aesthetics as well; Sylvia Shaw is correct in stating:

“Oration on Genius” is one of America’s earliest romantic manifestoes, if not the first: early in that it anticipated the literary movement that would sweep over from its stronghold in Europe, and romantic in that it exalts individualism, nature, and intuitive perception. It does this from a uniquely Swedenborgian perspective, tempering the excesses of romanticism with theology.²¹

Reed also writes of the organic qualities of language and the distinction between this and the Word of God. Reed had written on this subject the year before in an unpublished composition entitled “A Dissertation on the Evidence from the Light of Nature of a Future Retribution.” Shaw writes that the title is misleading; the essay has little to do with “future retribution,” and is more concerned with divine truth. Also, Reed’s “Dissertation” begins to sketch an outline for aesthetics, particularly in regard to poetry, which will be more fully developed in *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*. In the “Dissertation” Reed writes, “The Word of God presents a mirror, which reflects the human mind in its several stages of improvement,”²² and, later,

The Word of God is immutable, as he is; and all its apparent changes are only the motion of the human mind. Human theology has indeed, in all ages, and all places, from savage ignorance to Christian perversion, cast its own vileness on our maker. It was the intention of the Word to restore to man the image of God. Human systems have brought down God to the image of man. But the word still remains unchanged. . . .

When the Word of God shall have thus restored the human mind to divine order, it will no longer be obliged to believe where it does not understand - - and will no longer strain itself to admit what it cannot comprehend. But being enabled - - by constantly shunning all evils as sins, even to the minutest thought and feeling - - to see in religion the end and cause in the effect, a truth will become its own demonstration. For every such truth is an image of God.²³

Thus words carry their divine origin. Manipulation of the word has caused further separation from God, but just as God is eternal, so is the word. Hence this statement from the “Oration”: at the beginning of the “history of poetry” lies “the first rude effusions . . . where words make one with things, and language is lost in nature.”²⁴ Language is coeval with God, and for Reed contains the spirit of God; indeed, this is the usefulness of language. For the true poet, “The genius of mind will descend, and unite with the genius of the rivers, the lakes, and the woods. Thoughts fall to earth with power, and make a language out of nature.”²⁵ Reed will take these thoughts further in *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*, but it is important here to consider some aspects of Reed’s conception of language, especially the “Word of God.”

For Reed, the expression “the Word” implies not a linguistic component but an expression of the will, or spirit, of God. Reed’s use of *Word* here is figurative; the expression is not a metaphor. In Reed’s idea of the Word as the will of God there are no separate vehicle and tenor components of the metaphoric trope. These components are combined in the mind of God, which *presents* the world, but has no need for a language to *re-present* the world. Again, the Word of God is coeval *with* God. But Reed is caught in a post-lapsarian trap: language is necessary because we became separated from God; thus, we require language as mediation, or, in Swedenborgian terminology, a “correspondence” with nature. Reed, in the “Dissertation,” states two key Swedenborgian principles: that the Bible is the highest truth, and that the Bible appeals

on different levels to the differing stages of each individual mind's development. For Swedenborg's followers, his writings were the truth revealed to his mind from the Word of God. But Reed here presents abstraction, or, more accurately, a non-temporal condition in which language was not necessary. He makes this point clear in this passage from the "Oration on Genius":

Adam and Eve knew no language but their garden. They had nothing to communicate by words, for they had not the power of concealment. The sun of the spiritual world shone bright on their hearts, and their senses were open with delight to natural objects. In the eye were the beauties of paradise; in the ear was the music of birds; in the nose was the fragrance of the freshness of nature; in the taste was the fruit of the garden; in touch, the seal of their union. What had they to say?²⁶

Reed is not referring to the spoken word specifically in the last line, but to language itself as names, representing aspects of nature; or, words as *things*. Nor is he lamenting the conditions that necessitated language; rather, he is making the point that nature *was* language. There was no need for a mediating system of *representation* in the *unity* of Eden. In the "Dissertation," Reed considers the problem this way:

The Bible is the Word of God and must be holy - - it is the inspiration of the Almighty, and will give us understanding. When God becomes an author, what are we to expect? Sure, not merely that there is nothing false or erroneous in his revelation. We might look for that from the pen of a child. . . . We are to suppose that God will infuse his spirit into his Word, - - that it will be the form of his love, which is wisdom, - - that it will be, what it professes to be, God, - - that it will be as much superior to human composition, as nature is to art, - - that it shall contain truths which shall lay open and make bare the soul to its very centre, for the soul needs opening to its centre, - - that it shall open the communications with heaven, which can be clogged by nothing but what is evil in the will, or false in the understanding.²⁷

The word which can "make the soul bare to its very centre" is a powerful word indeed; Reed's phrase demonstrates that he now intends to consider the "word" in a linguistic sense. Thus, we are cognizant of two problems Reed confronts in his consideration of aesthetics: how can

language represent nature, and how can we determine whether the language we choose is true to the spirit of God? These considerations constitute such a proportionately large part of the “Dissertation,” the “Oration on Genius,” and *Growth of the Mind* that these works are primarily exercises in aesthetics rather than spirituality. Reed considers post-lapsarian spirituality as essentially an aesthetic experience; determining a true spiritual experience involves such matters as truth in language and perception, since we no longer have an inherent, non-linguistic understanding of nature. Reed makes this specific determination about the genesis and function of language, writing in 1832:

Every thing in the natural world corresponds to things in the spiritual world, and may be considered the containing vessels of spiritual things. It may be readily conceived that previous to man’s declension from goodness and truth, he saw, in the productions of nature, as in a glass, things appertaining to the spiritual world, consequently, when he beheld natural things, he also through them perceived spiritual things, and having nothing to obstruct communication between himself and heaven, his mind was continually opened to heaven and things thereof. As long as man remained in this celestial state and had intercourse with heaven, a written Word was not necessary. But when he had declined from his first integrity, and thereby excluded himself from communication with heaven and knowledges appertaining thereto; in order to preserve him in a salvable state, the Divine Providence in love and mercy gave a revelation of himself, written in images and things of this world, which involve his spiritual and celestial truth. This covering or garment of the spiritual sense of the Word is represented by “cherubims and a flaming sword which turned every way to guard the tree of life,” for man, in his lowest state, not being receptive of Divine Truth in its highest purity, would otherwise have profaned it. The letter, or covering of the Word, as a protection to Divine Truth, may be turned every way; may admit of many explanations without profaning the sanctity of the spiritual sense which it involves. Whereof a belief of apparent truths read in the letter, although not real truths, will do no injury, provided man lives a life in obedience to the Divine commands, which cannot be misunderstood.²⁸

In a sense, then, the search for true spirituality becomes an aesthetic exercise. Reed expresses this in a letter to Theophilus Parsons, dated May 31, 1823, composed halfway between the “Dissertation” and *Growth of the Mind*:

If you keep the Word of God in front of you as essential poetry, I think you must know where to look for everything else, as instinctively as animals know the point of compass. The different kinds of poetry as they have been classified by writers on the subject, are something that I know very little about but I should think that the natural mind had made divisions here as elsewhere, many of which would disappear before a single view of goodness and truth united. Whether Lyric, Pastoral, Heroic or what not, poetry can have but one essence, love, but one form, nature. There may be infinite variety in the time, but they all require articulation and sound. I can see no rhymes in nature, and hardly blank verse, but a happy assemblage of living objects, not in straight lines and at a fixed distance, but springing up in God's own order, which by its apparent want of design, leaves on the heart an image of its essential innocence and humility.²⁹

Thus the epitome of aesthetics here is to trace *words* back to their origin in *things*. The truest language is that which most clearly reveals nature. For Reed this aesthetic has a pragmatic spiritual component: the poet who, through language, is closest to nature is closest to the mind of God. In this post-lapsarian condition, the use of language has become a metaphoric operation with a distinct, spiritual purpose, according to Swedenborg. It may be expressed this way: when Reed writes of the "Word of God" in an abstract or pre-lapsarian sense, the usage is figurative. However, when Reed writes of "words" as identification or naming things, then the usage is metaphoric. Indeed, just as the fall created the need for language, it also necessarily creates the potential for metaphoric expression.

In this passage from the "Dissertation," Reed's use of the "Word" questions the possibilities of his own figurative and metaphoric usage:

The Word of God presents a mirror, which reflects the human mind in its several stages of improvement: though always in one degree better than it really is. Or in other words, the sentiments taught, and the commandments given, invariably have a tendency to elevate - - or are of a higher order than would be obtained if the mind were left to itself.³⁰

Here the Word of God *presents*, rather than represents (or re/presents), a mirror. Our inclination is to think of the Word as well as the mirror as metaphors; and though it seems to be a metaphor,

it is not because Reed uses the Word and the mirror to express the mind of God. But the human mind is a *re-flection*, a word which necessitates the figure of the mirror, in the mind's "several stages of improvement." Now the usage *is* a metaphor, because not only does Reed's phrase "several stages of improvement" imply a temporal condition (thus we know Reed is writing of post-lapsarian humankind), but also because of the *re-* prefix in "reflection." The mirror is equated *with*, not a metaphorical expression *of*, the Word of God. But the human mind *is* used in a metaphoric sense, since it *reflects* a lower stage of development concerning the Word of God. In the first part of the sentence, *Word of God* and *mirror* are equated; in the second part, *reflection* is the vehicle and *mind*, "in its various stages of development," is the tenor. The separation of humans from God creates the metaphoric trope itself; when Reed asked earlier regarding Adam and Eve in Paradise "What had they to say?," he was not thinking of their lack of conversation topics.

The condition of fallen humanity also presents a second aspect of Reed's aesthetic: his decided preference for visual metaphor, and his expressions of finding *truth* in terms of possessing accurate *vision*, or, more precisely, an accurate *condition of seeing*. I choose this terminology to define a key component of Reed's aesthetic. An individual's connection with nature is dependent upon the degree of development of that person's individual mind; it is the condition of the mind (an often repeated phrase in Reed's writings) which determines the individual's ability to realize God in nature. This is deeply connected with visual acuity, though this particular phrase is not entirely adequate. Realizing God in the world depends not so much on accuracy of vision, but by the conditions under which this experience is carried out. In other words, there are internal and external components which make up the condition of seeing - - internal, in that the development

of the mind is an essential part; and external, in that the material circumstances of the experience complete, or in some ways define, the experience. Thus, the condition of seeing is a consideration of the mental and physical aspects of the act of cognition. The condition of seeing is a consideration of the translation of image into language (poetry); reproducing image as a material representation of the world (photography); and utilizing repeating images to create a new presentation of the world (film).

When Reed speaks of vision, of seeing, or of the eye, he often means the physical act of seeing instead of sight as a metaphor for *perception* or *insight*. The human eye is to Reed the preferred conduit for realizing (in the sense of *making real*) truth in nature; Reed uses vision far more often than he refers to other means of sensual perception. Writing in 1831 Reed states, “the sight of man depends upon his intellectual principle; and in the spiritual world, those who do not think truly cannot see correctly.”³¹ Reed makes clear the significance of the eye in the “Oration”:

The intellectual eye of man is formed to see the light, not to make it; and it is time that, when the causes that cloud the spiritual world are removed, man should rejoice in the truth itself, and not that he has found it. More than once, when nothing was required for a person to stand on this world with his eyes open, has the truth been seized upon as a thing of his own making. When the power of divine truth begins to dispel the darkness, the objects that are first disclosed to our view - - whether men of strong understanding, or of exquisite taste, or of deep learning - - are called geniuses.³²

Throughout the “Dissertation” and the “Oration,” Reed does use visual terms in more conventional ways, but he also uses specific visual examples to distinguish different conditions of seeing. Here he is employing the metaphor to demonstrate perception, but he is also determining a specific condition necessary for the usefulness of seeing. In this example, Reed makes the obvious point that the eye is “formed to see light, not to make it”; or, that man is meant to perceive, not determine, divine truth. Thus sight is a key component to the idealized conception

of words as things. In most cases of Reed's expression of Swedenborgian principles, the primary consideration is sight: nature must be seen correctly before it can be realized. Reed writes in the *New Jerusalem Magazine* in 1831, "The sight of man depends upon his intellectual principle; and in the spiritual world those who do not think truly, cannot see correctly."³³ Again, as with the Word, the fall from grace has created separation between *seeing* (nature) and *realizing* (truth).

There is no evidence to suggest that Emerson read Reed's 1820 "Dissertation." The paper was not published, and though Reed may have offered the essay to Emerson, if he did read it he did not comment on it. However, the principal theme of the "Dissertation" - - the realization of truth - - received more complete development in Reed's 1826 book *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*. Aside from the 1880 biography of Dr. Thomas Worcester, this is the only book Reed left for the public. If Emerson had kept the "Oration on Genius" "as a treasure," *Growth of the Mind* would be his new source book. Indeed, Reed's *Growth of the Mind* would affect Emerson much as Emerson's work would affect Whitman twenty years later.

Many of the ideas from Reed's "Dissertation" are more fully elaborated in *Growth of the Mind*. One of these ideas is that the fall from grace created separation from God, and thus separation from the unity, or oneness, humans and God shared. Reed begins *Growth of the Mind* on this note; his intention is to make clear that the fall has for eternity separated humanity from the mind of God, and that all attempts to re-approach a state of grace come from within, from the changing condition of the human mind. This point is central to Swedenborg, and thus to Reed, who often writes of this "condition of the mind." If humans are to realize God, the condition of the mind must change. In *Growth of the Mind*, Reed will explore the importance, and the consequences, of the varying conditions of the human mind.

First, though, Reed wants his readers to know of their present state, relative to the former state of grace:

Since the fall of man, nothing has been more difficult for him than to know his real condition, since every departure from divine order is attended with a loss of the knowledge of what it is. When our first parents left the garden of Eden, they took with them no means by which they might measure the depths of degradation to which they fell; no chart by which they might determine their moral longitude. . . . The actual condition of man can be seen only in the relation in which he stands to his immutable Creator; and this relation is discovered from the light of revelation, so far as, by conforming to the precepts of revelation, it is permitted to exist according to the laws of divine order.³⁴

Not only has man fallen, but he has no way to know just how far he has fallen, except by revelation; this revelation is only permitted within the precepts of divine order. In his “Dissertation,” part of Reed’s complaint is that man looks for revelation in the words of the Bible, rather than in the natural world in which he lives. The danger of relying on words is that language may be corrupted. This is one consequence of the fall: it necessitated the creation of language, a language that must exist *in the world*, rather than solely in the mind of God, which we presumably once shared. But Reed here goes on to state that the *fact* of the Bible is not enough: “It is not sufficient that the letter of the Bible is in the world. This may be, and still mankind continue in ignorance of themselves. It must be obeyed from the heart to the hand. The book must be eat, and constitute the living flesh.”³⁵ This comment again suggests words as things, but more importantly here words as *food*, to find their usefulness in living flesh; the word must not be “dead,” as it were, but animated. The animated word becomes a word that is not only text in terms of a symbol, or a representation of an idea, but a word of greater dimension - - in short, something more like an *image*. Reed associates the visual with the linguistic shortly following the previous statement: “But when the relative state of the world is justly viewed from the real state

of the individual, the scene is lighted from the point of the beholder with the chaste light of humility which never deceives; it is not forgotten that the way lies forward.”³⁶ Reed’s statement, while clarifying his point about perception, also makes clear an aesthetic component of his thinking. There is an evident connection in Reed’s writing between the Word, image, and truth, a connection that will not be lost on Emerson.

Also of importance in Reed’s *Growth of the Mind* is his suggestion that art is intimately connected with nature: “Nor do we find a nearer approach to reality by any analysis of nature. Everything, as was said, is subject to change, and one change prepares the way for another; by which there is growth and decay. There are also motions of bodies, both in nature and art, which in their operation observe fixed laws; and here we end.”³⁷ Reed is following Swedenborg’s doctrine of cause and effect, that time is not inherent in the world, but is a result of processes of nature, and therefore a condition of the mind. In fact, time can only be experienced by observing this cause and effect relationship present in nature:

The more we enter into an analysis, the farther we are from finding anything that answers to the distinctness and reality which are usually attached to a conception of time, and . . . when this distinctness and reality are most deeply rooted, (whatever may be the theory), they are uniformly attended with a practical belief of the actual motion of the sun, and are indeed the effect of it. Let us then continue to talk of time, as we talk of the rising and setting of the sun; but let us think rather of those changes in their origin and effect, from which a sense of time is produced. This will carry us one degree nearer the actual condition of things.³⁸

Swedenborg removes time from the world and places it solely in the mind, while noting that the mind is regulated by uniform processes of nature. In this Swedenborg, and Reed, establish a universal standard by which experience may be measured, preferable to conventional notions of time. Time is the effect of nature at work, and since nature is the expression of God, it is by

nature (cause) we should reckon time (effect). Reed gives preeminence to the physical, material world, as opposed to the realm of metaphysics. Swedenborgian doctrine makes no distinction between the material realities of the physical and spiritual worlds; both worlds are actual and real.

Reed writes in the *New Jerusalem Magazine* in 1834:

From the revelations made to the New Church, we learn that the spiritual world is an actual, real, external world, similar in its appearance to angels and spirits, to what the natural world is to men. Thus there are in the spiritual world, animals, fields, gardens, trees, flowers, fruits, houses, and dwellings, as in the natural world; only they are spiritual and substantial, and not material as they are here. . . . In the spiritual world, external things are produced from, or strictly speaking, through the states of those whom they surround, and are consequently in correspondence with them. But this is not the case in the natural world. In the spiritual world they also change as the interior state changes; but in the natural world they are fixed and permanent.³⁹

This is the *doctrinal* significance of Reed's statement that "It is not a useless task . . . to remove from our minds the usual ideas of time, and cultivate a memory of things."⁴⁰ However, this statement has *aesthetic* possibilities as well.

Growth of the Mind may be read as Reed's definition of an ideal aesthetic. The central element of Reed's aesthetic is the eye; his writing continually circles back to the eye as the central point where perception, truth, insight, observation, and the measure of the condition of the mind are found and defined. The eye, for Reed, is "the point at which the united rays of the sun within and the sun without, converge to an expression of unity."⁴¹ Thus the *image* becomes significant in reading Sampson Reed, in as much as he uses this term both physically and, less so, metaphorically; he states in the "Dissertation" that "truth is an image of God."⁴² Since in Reed's work God cannot be separated from truth, *image* seems to be a metaphorical expression by which we understand the relation between God and truth. But Reed knows, and often expresses, the importance of actual, material imaging of nature, especially in consideration of the cause and

effect processes of natural cycles that create, for humans, the illusion of time. Reed, here, uses *image* to denote the visual perception of nature, which is a realization of God. The term *image* generally carries both of these implications. However, he also writes of the Word in relation to image. Hence the strongest statement of his three early works: "It was the intention of the Word to restore to man the image of God."⁴³ Here the Word contains, or at least has the capability to contain, the image of God; conversely, God may be revealed through the Word as an image, or in an imagistic sense. The wavering element in this would-be equation of image-Word-God is human: "Human systems have brought down God to the image of man. But the word still remains unchanged."⁴⁴ As has been seen earlier in Reed's work, the unity of paradise constitutes a unity of word and image; indeed, the two are the same, and are not an expression of God, but *are* God. The separation of humankind from a state of grace splits the components of this equation. Reed's interest in creating an ideal aesthetic, then, is to define the terms by which man goes about restoring, or at least approximating, this unity.

Reed makes his strongest aesthetic intentions clear when he is writing about poetry, his concern as opposed to fiction; obviously, fiction is illusory, just as metaphysics in science is illusory as opposed to the fact of nature. Reed recognized the capacity of poetry to locate the connection between *word* and *thing*; the true poet, one with an accurate condition of seeing, could realize the possibilities of this. Reed was neither poet nor critic; he was not a creative writer at all. Instead, he envisioned poetry as a means of reestablishing the connection between words and things for the purpose of revealing God in the world:

Of all the poetry which exists, that only possesses the seal of immortality, which presents the image of God which is stamped on nature. Could the poetry which now prevails be viewed from the future, when all partialities and antipathies shall have passed away, and

things are left to rest on their own foundations; when good works shall have dwindled into insignificance, from the mass of useless matter that may have fallen from them, and bad ones shall have ceased to allure with false beauty; we might catch a glimpse of the rudiments of this divine art amid the weight of extraneous matter by which it is now protected, and which it is destined to throw off. The imagination will be refined into a chaste and sober view of unveiled nature. It will be confined within the bounds of reality.⁴⁵

It is important to note here that when Reed refers to poetry as the “divine art,” he is being neither figurative nor metaphorical. He is seeing the capability of poetry, through the conduit of an imagination “chaste and sober,” as a condition of seeing (or *imaging*) God. The “mass of useless matter” referred to above is further qualified by Reed: “It may be peculiar, and is said with deference to the opinions of others, but to my ear, rhymes add nothing to poetry, but rather detract from its beauty. They possess too strongly the marks of art; and produces a sameness which tires, and sometimes disgusts.”⁴⁶ By *art* Reed intends *artifice*, as he detailed in 1823: “I can see no rhymes in nature, and hardly blank verse, but a happy assemblage of living objects, not in straight lines and at a fixed distance, but springing up in Gods own order, which by its apparent want of design, leaves on the heart an image of its essential innocence and humility.”⁴⁷ What Reed considers the “beauty” of poetry is evident: a “chaste and sober view of unveiled nature.” Reed’s “use” for poetry is for the perception of truth. And, as has been demonstrated, the locus of truth for Reed is the eye, and the connection between vision and truth:

When there shall be a religion which shall see God in everything, and at all times; and the natural sciences, not less than nature itself, shall be regarded in connection with Him; the fire of poetry will begin to be kindled in its immortal part, and will burn without consuming. The inspiration so often feigned, will become real, and the mind of the poet will feel the spark which passes from God to nature. The veil will be withdrawn, and beauty and innocence displayed to the eye; for which the lasciviousness of the imagination and the wantonness of desire may seek in vain.⁴⁸

Thus it is the role of the *poet* to recognize the beauty inherent in nature; the true poet will be able to express this beauty in language. The principal action for this translation of things into words is the proper condition of seeing; that is, an eye that sees truth - - the basis for Reed's aesthetics.

The quality of poetry is determined by its usefulness, which conforms to a key Swedenborgian doctrine. Humans are created to be useful; and it is the human lot to find use in the world. If this is realized correctly, truth - - for the poet as well as the scientist - - will be realized as the purpose of God for humans fulfilled. Again, it is important to recall Swedenborg's insistence that the Bible appeals to the *individual* mind according to each mind's degree of development.

Swedenborg's doctrine is realized, as has been seen, by Reed's writing style; he employs tropes only for clarification - - Reed's *usefulness* in action. But why does he insist on the importance of the poet?

As has been said, Swedenborg is concerned with the development of the human mind for the purpose of a better understanding of the Word of God. This is of utmost significance, because, after the fall, the only connection with God is through language. Reed writes:

There is then another power which is necessary to the orderly development of the mind - - the power of the word of God. . . . No possessions and no efforts of the mind are unconnected with it, whatever may be the appearance. Revelation so mingles with everything which meets us, that it is not easy for us to measure the degree to which our condition is affected by it. Its affects appear miraculous at first, but after they have become established, the mind, as in the ordinary operations of nature, is apt to become unconscious of the power by which they are produced. All growth or development is effected from within, outward.⁴⁹

Reed uses the model of organic growth to describe the development of the mind - - from the inside out, with the implication that the effects of the mind radiate still further out. That humans possess language is to say that the word of God is present in the mind, perhaps at the center of the

mind, as its animating agent. Reed writes of it, “Were it not for a power within the soul, as the soul is within the body, it could have no possibility of subsistence.”⁵⁰ The word of God can be found within humans, again according to the individual degree of development, just as the Divine Truth may be realized in nature, according to the condition of seeing: “It is the union of the Divine with the human - - of that from which all things are, and on which they depend, the Divine Will, with man through the connecting medium of Divine Truth. It is the tendency of the Bible to effect this union, and of course to restore a consciousness of it.”⁵¹ Poetry, for Reed, is less an aesthetic exercise than an expression of truth, and in that it differs from fiction: “Fiction in poetry must fall with theory in science, for they depend equally on the words of creation. The word fiction, however, is not intended to be used in its most literal sense; but to embrace whatever is not on exact agreement with the creative spirit of God.”⁵² Poetry is aligned with truth, and truth is dependent on vision, or conditions of seeing. By “creation” in the preceding quote, Reed refers again to artifice; he does not intend a connection between “creation” in this sense and the “creative spirit of God,” or Divine Truth. *This* is the realm of Reed’s poet.

The poet’s responsibility, his usefulness, relies on his ability to see the word of God in the world, as this is necessary for the further development of all minds:

It is the sole object of the Bible to conjoin the soul with God; and, as this is effected, it may be understood in what way the Holy Spirit operates interiorly to produce its development. It is not a mere metaphor, it is a plain and simple fact that the Spirit of God is as necessary to the development of the mind, as the power of the natural sun to the growth of vegetables, and in the same way.⁵³

As a way of qualifying further what he regards as “poetry,” Reed dismisses metaphor as artifice. For Reed, though, these tropes are only appropriate when useful, and he objects to the composition of poetry solely for pleasure: “The arts have been courted merely for the transient

gratification they afford. Their connection with religion and with the sciences is beginning to be discovered; and they are yet a powerful influence in imparting to the mind its moral harmony and proportions.”⁵⁴ This is the *usefulness* of the arts, and specifically of the poet:

The true poet, when his mind is full, fills his language to overflowing; and it is left to the reader to preserve what the words cannot contain. It is that part which cannot be defined; that which is too delicate to endure the unrestrained gaze; that which shrinks instinctively from the approach of anything less chaste than itself, and though present, like the inhabitants of the other world, is unperceived by flesh and blood, which is worth all the rest.⁵⁵

Reed’s poet is more a prophet than a versifier; indeed, it is the *gift* of the poet - - the word stops just short of *responsibility* - - to intuit what humans desire, “language neither extravagant nor cold, but blood-warm,” because when “the imagination (which is called the creative power of man) shall coincide with the actively creative will of God, reason will be clothed with eloquence, as nature is with verdure.”⁵⁶

Sampson Reed’s world is filled with human minds in varying degrees of mental development; those more highly developed are closer to a condition of seeing that recognizes the inherent divinity in nature. These poets - - chaste, pure, and possessing a willingness to be vessels for the Spirit of God to be *envisioned* - - realize the word through the medium of the imagination, and deliver poems by virtue of the power of the Word of God, present in the world of nature, blood, and flesh. This is the spiritual rejuvenation Swedenborg believed was happening in the late eighteenth century. Swedenborg believed that “the Last Judgement took place in the ‘world of spirits’ in the year 1757, as a result of which a new heaven was formed, and because the Lord, Jesus Christ, has made or is making his Second Coming, in deeper revelation of His Word, a New Church is being instituted on earth, which shall be the crown of all the churches.”⁵⁷ Thus the

insistence on the recognition of inherent divinity in nature, in physicality, as opposed to the intellectualism favored by Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke. Christ is *here*, if we know how to *see* his divine truth. And, of course, the seed of this condition of seeing - - the power of the Word of God - - is born into every soul, awaiting potential development. Reed writes, “The seed which is planted is said to possess in miniature, the trunk, branches, leaves and fruit of the future tree. So it is with the mind. . . . In the process of the formation of our minds there exists the spirit of prophecy; and no advancement can create surprise, because we have always been conscious of that from which it is produced.”⁵⁸

Reed’s aesthetic, then, consists of these components: the properly developed mind; the correct condition of seeing; the chastity and purification necessary to produce the Word of God, distilled through the eye, without the falsity of artifice. In imagining a plan of instruction for a scholar of truth, Reed offers this advice:

I would point him to that source from which the author himself had caught his inspiration, and, as I led him to the baptismal fount of nature, I would consecrate his powers to that Being from whom nature exists. I would cultivate a sense of the constant sense and agency of God, and direct him inward to the presence-chamber of the Most High, that his mind might become imbued with His spirit. I would endeavor, by the whole course of his education, to make him a living poem, that, when he read the poetry of others, it might be effulgent with the light of his own mind. The poet stands on the mountain, with the face of nature before him, calm and placid. If we would enter into his views, we must go where he is. We must catch the direction of his eye, and yield ourselves up to the instinctive guidance of his will, that we may have a secret foretaste of his meaning - - that we may be conscious of the image in its first conception - - that we may perceive its beginnings and gradual growth, till at length it becomes distinctly depicted on the retina of the mind.⁵⁹

It is little wonder that, at that time, these words fired the spirit of the twenty-three year old Emerson, Divinity School dropout and disenchanted Unitarian pedant. Emerson would take

Reed's advice and pursue the "image in its first conception" until it burned, unrelenting, in the retina of his own mind.

Notes

1. Clarence Paul Hotson, "Sampson Reed, A Teacher of Emerson," *New England Quarterly* 2:2 (April 1929), 249.
2. Clarence Paul Hotson, "Emerson and Swedenborg." Ph.D. diss (Harvard University, 1929), 128.
3. Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson Volume I: 1833-1836* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 222.
4. Jerome Loving, "Emerson's Foreground," in *Emerson Centenary Essays*, ed. Joel Myerson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 61.
5. The 1889 edition of *Observation on the Growth of the Mind* is prefaced with "A New Biographical Preface by James Reed," Sampson Reed's son.
6. Sampson Reed, *A Biographical Sketch of Thomas Worcester, D.D.* (Boston: Massachusetts New Church Union, 1880), 15-16.
7. James Reed, "Preface." Sampson Reed, *Observation on the Growth of the Mind* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1889), v.
8. William Hill (1762-1804) came to America for the sole purpose of disseminating information about Emanuel Swedenborg. He became a friend of Harvard President Kirkland, and deposited a set of the *Arcana Cælestia* in the Harvard Library on July 11, 1794. Clarence Hotson, "Emerson and Swedenborg." Ph.D. diss. (Harvard University, 1929), 81.
9. Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist: Volume I* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1945), 254.
10. Cameron notes that "These were probably the *Arcana Cælestia*, (7 vols. in quarto), London, 1749-1754, listed in the *Catalogue of the Library*, Cambridge, 1830, II, 814. By 1830, Harvard had an excellent collection of Swedenborg's writings, including another set of the *Arcana Cælestia*, (5 vols. in octavo), London, 1792." *Emerson the Essayist I*, 254.
11. Reed, *Worcester*, 15-16.
12. Sylvia Shaw, "Preface." *Sampson Reed: Primary Source Material for Emerson Studies. Swedenborg Studies I* (New York City and Westchester, PA: Monographs for the Swedenborg Foundation, 1992), vii.
13. Ibid., v. However, Ralph Rusk, in *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1949), notes that "Ralph Emerson thought the best thing on the commencement program was an oration on genius by Sampson Reed, a graduate who had returned to Cambridge, after the prescribed three years of

good behavior, to take his Master's degree. Reed's theme was the divinity of genius. The young Swedenborgian was vigorously announcing a new spiritual dawn. It is not surprising that, though his bold proclamation struck most listeners as tiresome, it caught the fancy of the senior from Federal Street and he borrowed the manuscript and copied it" (87).

14. Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 50.

15. Ibid.

16. Sampson Reed, "Oration on Genius." In Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist: Volume II* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1945), 9.

17. Reed, "Oration," 10.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Shaw, v.

22. Sampson Reed, "A Dissertation on the Evidence from the Light of Nature of a Future Retribution." In *Sampson Reed: Primary Source Material for Emerson Studies*. Swedenborg Studies 1 (New York City and Westchester, PA: Monographs for the Swedenborg Foundation, 1992), 2.

23. Reed, "Dissertation," 10.

24. Reed, "Oration," 10.

25. Ibid, 11.

26. Reed, "Oration," 11.

27. Reed, "Dissertation," 5-6.

28. Sampson Reed, "Apparent Truth Not Always Real Truth," *New Jerusalem Magazine* 5 (Nov. 1831), 264-65.

29. Sampson Reed, Letter to Theophilus Parsons, 31 May 1823. In Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist II*, 211-212.

30. Reed, "Dissertation," 2.

31. Sampson Reed, "Remarks on the Nature of Spiritual Heat and Light," *New Jerusalem Magazine* 5 (Nov. 1831), 97.
32. Reed, "Oration," 9.
33. Reed, "Remarks on the Nature of Spiritual Heat and Light," 97.
34. Sampson Reed, *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*. Reprint of first edition, Boston, 1826. In Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist II*, 13.
35. Reed, *Growth of the Mind*, 13.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid, 16.
38. Ibid.
39. Sampson Reed, "Distinction Between the Laws of the Spiritual World, and Those of the Natural, Arising From the Fixedness of Material Things," *New Jerusalem Magazine* 8 (November 1834), 95.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid, 18.
42. Reed, "Dissertation," 10.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Reed, *Growth of the Mind*, 21.
46. Ibid, 22.
47. Sampson Reed, Letter to Theophilus Parsons, 31 March 1823. *Emerson the Essayist II*, 212.
48. Reed, *Growth of the Mind*, 22.
49. Ibid, 25.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid, 21.

53. Ibid, 25.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid, 26.

56. Ibid, 28.

57. Hotson, “Emerson and Swedenborg,” 96.

58. Ibid, 30.

59. Ibid, 26.

Chapter 2

Emerson: Regenerating the Eye

On August 29, 1821 eighteen-year-old Waldo Emerson, along with the sixty other members of his Harvard graduating class, listened to Sampson Reed's address, entitled "Oration on Genius." The speech was, for Emerson, something of an epiphany. Emerson was of the seventh generation of Emersons whose direct male ancestors had been ministers. Reed challenged the graduates to question the doctrines of the church; he said, "It needs no uncommon eye to see that the finger of death has rested on the church." Robert Richardson notes that Reed's address was "not a critique, an exercise, an endorsement, or an argument. It was a primary statement . . . alight with passion and had the solidity and self-possession of conviction."¹ Looking for "a unison of spirit and nature," Reed invoked science and the study of nature, for this is where truth is found by "the intellectual eye of man . . . formed to see the light, not to make it. . . . genius is divine, not when the man thinks that he is God, but when he acknowledges that his powers are from God." God is found in the inherent divinity of the natural world, if only one knows how to see it: "thoughts fall to the earth with power, and makes a language out of nature." Reed's address had a powerful affect on Emerson. Years later he wrote in a letter to Margaret Fuller that "he still remembered the speech as his first - - and still standing - - benchmark for true genius or original force."² Sampson Reed's "Oration," indeed, served as Emerson's "first impulse" toward a literary career.

Emerson's reaction to and praise for Reed's oration demonstrates the lengths to which he was affected; this is Emerson's first real sense of trying to "find his place," to quote the title of an early sermon. He did not enter Theological School (later renamed the Harvard Divinity School) after graduation, because the family was under considerable financial strain. Charles, the youngest of

the brothers, was making quite a name for himself in school studying law, and helped out by teaching when he could. Edward combined teaching with the reading of law, and Waldo felt a similar sense of responsibility, especially with William away in Germany, the care of Bulkeley to be considered, and Edward's declining health becoming a more serious issue. The oldest Emerson son, William, was studying theology with the "notorious" school of German Rationalism. Edward continued reading law in the office of Daniel Webster, and with Charles still in school expecting to become a lawyer, the lot fell to Waldo to take up the "family business" of the pulpit. Waldo's familial responsibility to the ministry was fortuitous for American letters.

The pressure Emerson felt, both from his own religious sense, his responsibility to six previous generations of Emersons, and the emphatic insistence of his most trusted confidant, Aunt Mary Moody Emerson, caused a great deal of stress for the already physically slight young man of twenty one. In a lengthy journal entry dated April 18, 1824, Emerson considers his prospects of success in the pulpit:

I cannot dissemble that my abilities are below my ambition. And I find that I judged by a false criterion when I measured my powers by my ability to understand & to criticise the intellectual character of another. For men graduate their respect not by the secret wealth but by the outward use; not by the power to understand, but by the power to act. . . . My reasoning faculty is proportionately weak, nor can I ever hope to write a Butler's Analogy or an Essay of Hume. Nor is it strange that with this confession I should choose theology, which is from everlasting to everlasting 'debateable Ground.' For, the highest species of reasoning upon divine subjects is rather the fruit of a sort of moral imagination, than of the 'Reasoning Machines' such as Locke & Clarke & David Hume. ³

Emerson's philosophical position favors the intuitive sense, as opposed to the "Reasoning Machines" of the Enlightenment. Emerson's complaint is with his own suspected inabilities in reasoning, but there is no envy here to write "an essay of Hume," who was the one philosopher

Emerson continually struggled against but could never manage to, as Aunt Mary feared, “shake him off.”⁴

Further in the same entry, Emerson questions his possibilities in Law: “Now the profession of Law demands a good deal of personal address, an impregnable confidence in one’s own powers, upon all occasions expected & unexpected, & a logical mode of thinking & speaking - - which I do not possess, & may not reasonably hope to attain.”⁵ While this perhaps reads as self-deprecation, and while it seems true that at this time self-confidence is not Emerson’s strongest personal quality, he goes forward in this entry to maintain his hopes for the ministerial career:

But in Divinity I hope to thrive. I inherit from my sire a formality of manner & speech, but I derive from him or his patriotic parent a passionate love for the strains of eloquence. I burn after the ‘*aliquid immensum infinitumque*’⁶ which Cicero desired. What we ardently love we learn to imitate. My understanding venerates & my heart loves that Cause which is dear to God & man - - the laws of Morals, the Revelations which sanction, & the blood of martyrs & triumphant suffering of the saints which seal them. In my better hours, I am the believer (if not the dupe) of brilliant promises, and can respect myself as the possessor of those powers which command the reason & passions of the multitude.⁷

Though alternating between cautious optimism and honest self-assessment, Emerson seems to be ready for the challenge of Divinity School, despite his shortcomings. However, the case may be that Emerson is attempting to evaluate for himself, and perhaps talk himself into, the confidence he needs and so sorely lacks. He does acknowledge the weight of six preceding generations of Emerson ministers, and he seems, here at least, determined not to disappoint his Aunt Mary. But still, even after this short burst of enthusiasm, Emerson finds conflicting evidence in his character that he will not succeed:

Every wise man aims at an entire conquest of himself. We applaud as possessed of extraordinary good sense, one who never makes the slightest mistake in speech or action; one in whom not only every important step of life, but every passage of conversation, every duty of the day, even every movement of every muscle - - hands, feet, & tongue, are

measured and dictated by deliberate reason. I am not assuredly that excellent creature. A score of words & deeds issue from me daily, of which I am not the master. They are begotten of weakness and born of shame. I cannot assume the elevation I ought, - - but lose the influence I should exert among those of meaner or younger understanding, for want of sufficient *bottom* in my nature, for want of that confidence of manner which springs from an erect mind which is without fear & without reproach. In my frequent humiliation, even before women & children I am compelled to remember the poor boy who cried, "I told you, Father, they would find me out." Even those feelings which are counted noble & generous, take in me the taint of frailty.⁸

Emerson's "confession" demonstrates his desire for a theological life, as well as his fear for the public exercise of that life. It seems even here that Emerson would be more suitable as a writer than a minister, but again, he is implicitly frightened that the decision is not entirely his own. To end this journal passage, Emerson considers his future:

I cannot accurately estimate my chances of success, in my profession & in life. Were it to judge the future from the past, they would be very low. In my case I think it is not. I have never expected success in my present employment.⁹ My scholars are carefully instructed, my money is faithfully earned, but the instructor is little wiser & the duties were never congenial with my disposition. Thus far the dupe of hope I have trudged on with my bundle at my back, and my eye fixed on the distant hill where my burden would fall. It may be I shall write *dupe* a long time to come & the end of life shall intervene betwixt me & the release. My trust is that my profession shall be my regeneration of mind, manners, inward & outward estate; or rather my starting point, for I have hoped to put on eloquence as a robe, and by goodness and zeal and the awfulness of virtue to press & prevail over the false judgements, the rebel passions & corrupt habits of men. We blame the past, we magnify & gild the future and are not wiser for the multitude of days. Spin on, Ye of the adamant spindle, spin on, my fragile thread.¹⁰

Despite his earlier optimism, this passage reveals a soul inadequately prepared for the offices of the Unitarian minister. The passage as a whole demonstrates Emerson's deep ambivalence about himself and about his chosen profession, but, interestingly, never calls into question his own faith, as this is one quality about which he is certain.

Emerson wrote to Aunt Mary, almost prophetically, on December 17, 1824:

I am blind I fear to the truth of a theology wh[ich] I cant but respect for the eloquence it begets & for the heroic life of its moder[n] & the heroic death of its ancient defenders. I acknowledge it tempts the imagination with a high epic (& better than epic) magnificence; but it sounds like mysticism in the ear of understanding. The finite & flitting kingdoms of this world may forget in [th]e course of ages their maxims of govt & annul today the edict of 1000 yrs. And none w[oul]d be surprised if the Rome of [th]e Popes sh[ou]d vary in policy from [th]e Rome of [th]e Consuls. But that [th]e administration of eternity is fickle, y[e]t [th]e God of Revelation hath seen cause to repent & botch up the ordinances of [th]e God of Nature - - I hold it not irreverent but impious in us to assume.¹¹

Here Emerson overtly confronts, beyond the private space of his journal, his disinclination toward the ministry. By January 4, 1825, he seems to have resigned himself to this fact.

Emerson's opposition to "pedigree" is interesting when contrasted with the fact that he will, indeed, engage in formal study for the pastoral office:

It is my own humor to despise pedigree. I was educated to prize it. The kind Aunt whose cares instructed my youth (& whom may God reward) told me oft the virtues of her & mine ancestors. They have been clergymen for many generations & the piety of all & the eloquence of many is yet praised in the Churches. But the dead sleep in their moonless night; my business is with the living. The Genius that keeps me, to correct the inequalities of my understanding did not make me brother to clods of the same shape & texture as myself but to my Contraries.¹²

Emerson continued reading and writing in his journal and notebooks while teaching in various schools, from 1821 to 1826, in New York, Roxbury, and Concord; he continued to struggle with his vocation, especially after being ignited by Sampson Reed's "Oration on Genius." Kenneth Cameron notes that Emerson began his study of Plato during his undergraduate years at Harvard, relying for information on summaries in the philosophy handbooks of the day.¹³ Cameron writes that "translations of Plato were scarce since as late as March 17, 1828, Emerson admitted that he was 'profoundly ignorant of the original' Greek volume; he could have had, during his undergraduate period, only a few volumes in English at his disposal."¹⁴ The Harvard College Library acquired a set of English translations of Plato's *Works* in 1820, though Emerson seems

not to have examined it much before November 1826.¹⁵ Cameron also notes that “Emerson’s philosophy deepened greatly between 1825 and 1836, because Coleridge’s volumes were always at his working table,”¹⁶ and Emerson’s absorption of Neo-Platonic thought (before 1836) probably came from three sources: Gérando’s *Histoire Comparée*; Ralph Cudworth’s *True Intellectual System*; and a number of contemporary philosophical handbooks.¹⁷ Emerson would also have read, besides Plato, some of Plutarch, Kant, Coleridge, and Wordsworth during his undergraduate years. Also, Sampson Reed had been an avid reader of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and this, along with Reed’s fluency with Swedenborg’s doctrine, both electrified and further complicated Emerson’s training for the pastorate. In 1824 Emerson began formal study of religion under the care of Dr. William Ellery Channing, and in 1825 he registered as a non-matriculating student at the Harvard Theological School. Edward Waldo Emerson, commenting on the importance of Emerson’s acquisition of Sampson Reed’s *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* (1826) notes in the 1904 *Centenary Edition* of Emerson’s works:

Its author, a quiet druggist in Boston, and a member of the Swedenborgian Church, had graduated at Harvard at the end of Emerson’s Freshman year. Some early verses, never finished, entitled only *S. R.*, seemed to show that even then something in Sampson Reed had attracted him. They begin:

Demure apothecary,
Whose early reverend genius my young eye
With wonder followed and undoubting joy,
Believing in that cold and modest form
Brooded alway the everlasting mind,
And that thou, faithful, didst obey the soul.

This book made Mr. Emerson a reader of Swedenborg, even in his days of study for the ministry.¹⁸

By 1825, though, the Theological staff had become separate from the general faculty of Harvard College, the Theological school claimed only three professors, and only one of these devoted exclusively to the school. The newly born Theological School had yet to attain its own standing, remaining under the control of its sponsor, the Society for the Promotion of Theological Education in Harvard University.¹⁹ The regular period of study was three years, and theoretically students were expected “to study Hebrew, Biblical history and criticism, natural and revealed religion, Christian theology, Christian institutions, ecclesiastical powers, and the rights, duties, and relations of the pastoral office.”²⁰ This is the school to which Emerson was admitted in early 1825, though still somewhat under the influence of Sampson Reed. There is no doubt that Emerson was already questioning not only Unitarian dogma, but also his own ability to carry out the responsibilities of a minister given his steadily growing lack of conviction and weak constitution. Because of the stresses under which Emerson had to maneuver his responsibilities to his family, his vocation and his own intellectual desires, as well as his own frailty, he suffered in 1825 a setback of tragic proportion: he began to lose his eyesight. Emerson biographer Ralph Rusk writes:

The fact that the steward of Harvard College, the official who looked out for the bills due to the Theological School, had for some time surprisingly little business with [Emerson] seems understandable in the light of a laconic autobiographical note that Waldo dated March, 1825, but certainly wrote much later: “lost the use of my eye for study.”²¹

Rusk notes that “family records of the time are too scanty to show whether an unconscious but positive distaste for formal theology” had anything to do with the failure of Emerson’s eyesight,²² but it is certain that he did suffer to a considerable degree an undoubtable physical ailment.

Edward Waldo Emerson wrote in 1889 of Emerson that “Mr. Emerson had a good eye for form,

and, that he would have drawn well with practice, the heads which he drew sometimes for his children's amusement showed. He had less eye for color He cared little for landscape painting. The symbolic, not the literal, charmed him."²³ Edward Waldo also reveals an important characteristic of Emerson's mental makeup in quoting this entry from Emerson's journal:

I think sometimes that my lack of musical ear is made good to me through my eyes: that which others hear, I *see*. All the soothing, plaintive, brisk or romantic moods which corresponding melodies waken in them, I find in the carpet of the wood, in the margin of the pond, in the shade of the hemlock grove, or in the infinite variety and rapid dance of the tree-tops as I hurry along.²⁴

Because Emerson stopped writing in 1825, and because of the lack of family records, it is difficult to assess the effect of possible blindness on Emerson. It seems safe to assume, however, that the thought of blindness was catastrophic for the twenty-one-year-old student. Continuation of his theological training was in doubt, and, due to the family's financial strain, he continued to teach, despite his declining eyesight. Charles was still a student, and Edward was himself overtaxed by reading law and teaching. Also, Waldo had taken over the care of Bulkeley in 1825. And, if he had felt the pangs of generational responsibility before, they were confirmed irrefutably when his brother William renounced the ministry on his return from Göttingen, Germany. William had met with Goethe before he left, and the great German poet advised him against disappointing the family by giving up the ministry, but instead had "unhesitatingly told him" to "preach to the people what they wanted" since "his personal belief was no business of theirs."²⁵ According to Goethe, William "could be a good preacher and a good pastor and no one need ever know what he himself had for his own private views."²⁶ But William,

during a terrific storm on the homeward Atlantic passage when he was more than once "compelled," as he said, "to sit down in the cabin, and tranquilly to make up what I deemed my last accounts with this world," had realized that he "could not go to the bottom in

peace with the intention in his heart of following the advice Goethe had given him” and so had “renounced the ministry; and had come home to begin the study of law.”²⁷

Emerson’s fate was now sealed; he alone would be responsible for continuing the line of Emerson ministers, and with William planning to attend school to study law, he had no choice but to continue to work.

Aunt Mary was ignorant of “the history rise & progress & prospects of W– eyes,”²⁸ and regarded the news a “calamitous as well as unexpected blow,” according to Rusk. Rusk also notes that “though she seemed to have imagined at one time that he might turn out to be a laureate of religion and a sort of second Milton, with poetry a sufficient compensation for blindness, she never allowed her vision of him as a great pulpit orator to be long obscured.”²⁹ Aunt Mary would have Waldo a minister, sighted or not.

Emerson had experienced a reasonably healthy life until 1825, when we consider the period in which he lived. Tuberculosis ran in the family, as it did in half of the population of Boston at the time. Of the eight Emerson children, only five survived until adulthood, and only two produced children. The timing of Waldo’s eye condition suggests that stress played a part in its onset, but the ailment was definitely real, not psychosomatic. Emerson’s condition was at least partially related, if not exaggerated, by his inherited tendency toward consumption.

Critic Evelyn Barish has been able to demonstrate the probable medical condition from which Emerson suffered. Emerson’s doctor, Edward Reynolds, was one of the founders of American ophthalmic medicine, and “was the leading surgeon in diseases of the eye in Boston and throughout New England . . . [he] knew all there was to know about eyes and eye surgery.”³⁰ The procedure most likely performed on Emerson, known to Reynolds and consistent with

Emerson's condition, was a treatment for *ophthalmia rheumatica*; the operation was to "evacuate the aqueous humor of the eye," according to James Wardrop, originator of the procedure.³¹ The procedure itself "was essentially simply the puncture of the cornea . . . by a cataract knife, couching needle, or other instrument which must be slightly turned to permit the aqueous humor to drain; otherwise, the fibers of the cornea would close the wound at once. . . . Dr. Wardrop held that the process was minor and should be repeated as often as necessary"³² Barish notes that Wardrop associated Emerson's symptoms with rheumatism, and that

when other parts of the body were inflamed, so would be the eye, sympathetically. Most importantly, the eye disease seemed to alternate with or strike soon after a rheumatic attack, especially after exposure to bad weather or sudden change in temperature, and most typically in the spring - - just the season when Emerson's first attack began. Other symptoms, apart from the pain in the head and the swelling of the eye, were a temperature that rose in the late afternoon and evening, impaired appetite, increased pulse, and "evacuations always changed in quality." We do not know if Emerson had all these other symptoms, but they are, of course, also symptoms of tuberculosis; . . . eye afflictions have a long history of association with tuberculosis.³³

There seems no reason to doubt Barish's inference that "given Emerson's rheumatic symptoms of the same period, this is in fact the operation which his doctor [Reynolds] twice performed to give him relief."³⁴

Robert Richardson concurs with Barish's findings:

The eye disease that struck Emerson in early 1825 was almost certainly uveitis, a rheumatic inflammation of the eye that gave the sufferer headaches and was often linked with rheumatism. The underlying cause was probably tuberculosis, which was pandemic at the time. Half the adults in Boston had it; one third of all deaths were from it. Over the next nine months Emerson underwent two operations in which his cornea was punctured with a cataract knife. By September 1825 he was well enough to teach school again In November he could do a little reading in Plato, but he did not take up his journals again until January 1826.³⁵

The years 1825-1827 signaled a period of distressing health for Emerson; after recovering sufficiently from his eye problems to return to religious study, he suffered an attack of rheumatoid arthritis in his hip, a condition which left him unable to leave his room in Divinity Hall to attend lectures. Once recovered, when Emerson began practicing the delivery of sermons required of all Divinity students, he began to experience “strictures” in his chest, almost certainly attacks of pleurisy,³⁶ sharp pains that shortened his breath and contracted his ability to speak. The timing of Emerson’s attacks has been noted by most of his critics and biographers; once Emerson had recovered from one ailment and was ready to return to training in orthodox Unitarianism, he suffered another debilitating attack. The terseness of his note to Andrews Norton, stating simply that he had “lost his eye for study,” and the suggestion from Rusk that the note was delivered some time after it was originally composed, suggests that Emerson felt the opposing stresses of a responsibility to continue his training and the guilt he felt at not wishing to do so, but to follow his own intuitive sense of religious experience. All biographers agree that tuberculosis was at least partially responsible for these very real physical ailments, and that stress certainly could have aggravated Emerson’s condition in varying degrees. In any event any confrontation regarding his Divinity School dilemma was at least postponed.

The troubling status of Emerson’s eye affliction is compounded by the fact that, before 1825, he had already begun to think of spiritual experience not only in visual terms (that is, utilizing visual metaphors), but that spiritual experience *is* a visual experience. Reading Emerson’s journals between 1821 and 1825 reveal a steadily increasing inclination toward the predominance of vision as inseparable from spiritual understanding. Early in the journals, Emerson uses terms such as light and dark with conventional associations, such as spiritual awakening or ignorance.

He uses eyes, too, and other visual terms in a way that reveals a more conventional, analogous usage; however, as the journals progress, visual language becomes more metaphoric, and, in its extreme, his usage supplants the trope and vision seems to become a spiritual experience in itself.

In an entry dated November 2, 1822, the visual reference seems rather conventional:

“Although we are surrounded by . . . proofs of the Omnipotence of God, yet, owing to the peculiar character of the Divine government, it is a fact that we are very blind to the forceful exhibitions of it which a purged eye can see.”³⁷ Here the opposition of “very blind” and “purged eye” are clearly understood as references to the Omnipotence of God and our realization of that Omnipotence. Yet even here Emerson notes that blindness, in this case, is due to the “peculiar character of the Divine government,” and a “purged eye” - - the eye of the poet? - - can see the Omnipotence of God. In this sense, spiritual experience is a condition of *seeing*.

Emerson writes, on January 11, 1823:

I am the tenant of a transitory Universe. Its pleasures & pains, its sights & sounds, its peace and / disturbance / revolutions / are nothing & vanity to me. They may be of stupendous magnitude and of infinite variety, but they are short and shall shortly die. It is curious to see how like shadows those events have come and gone.³⁸

This passage invokes Reed’s assertion of the permanence of the spiritual world and the meaninglessness of time, and while Emerson recognizes the “magnitude and variety” of this world, he also realizes its finitude. He is curious about the fact, and possibly the brevity, with which these events have “come and gone,” but significantly he is “curious to see how like shadows” they have done so. The emphasis in this expression is the image of seeing shadows, or seeing events as being *like* shadows; that is, these events are apparent, not real, and have no internal light. Emerson is careful not to note that the shadows are these passing events, but that

these events have the quality of shadows - - that is, darkness and unreality. Again, the distinction is subtle, but it does suggest the way in which Emerson's mind is working with visual references. Emerson, in an entry for June 13, 1823, establishes different perceptions of the world by each individual mind. This is not uncommon, nor surprising, given Emerson's predilection toward Romanticism. However, he creates a scene of visual disharmony, only to demonstrate later, by opposition, the profundity of the clear mind, the "purged eye":

The writings of men, & the pictures they have drawn of the world are not for the most part histories of facts but of feelings. We are tangled round in such a web of associations that scarce any thing affects *the whole world in one manner* but awakens a thousand trains of ideas in a thousand different persons connected in each with the peculiar circumstances of his Education. The ordinary views under which society is regarded by many minds, would appear altogether extravagant to others and the same scenes & one world are multiplied into unnumbered varieties in their modes of affecting men. . . . Here is a man who calls the world a den of monsters in divers shapes agreeing only in malignity & next door is one who paints it in rich & gaudy hues, whose pencil of light has hardly a shade to darken any corner of this Paradise where Virtue & Happiness abide in every form.³⁹

Emerson's thoughts seem clear enough; it is obvious here, as elsewhere, that Emerson recognizes the condition of the material world as being susceptible to the peculiar characteristics of each individual mind. The two men in the passage represent opposing views of the same world, and Emerson passes no judgment upon them - - he is merely stating a fact about the world. But in the next sentence of the same entry, Emerson offsets these portraits with an interesting counterpoint:

"And Man is an Angel of light walking in the Universe with the dignity of an immortal being."⁴⁰

This is not only Emerson's spiritualist with the "purged eye," but is the possibility - - or perhaps the fundamental quality - - of all men. He continues:

The ways of good & ill are open & unobstructed. No man can interfere with our Walk therein and no apology can be pleaded for the perversity of our choice. Though the moral way be clear & uniform, the intellectual path is devious & grotesque. - - Phantoms of sight that have no real existence, distorted pictures of life, & changeful spectacles that flutter in

the horizon of hope give wild & various aspect to the journey on which he is travelling. . . . If, in this dreamy world, we would keep the path of Common sense, we must carefully pick our way between many extremes - - and we shall everywhere find that Nature mixes the Angel & the brute in the moulding of Man.⁴¹

Emerson keeps the path of man located in this “dreamy world,” that is, this material world, this world of events that are “like shadows.” He insists again on the importance of the individual mind, and of the individual choice; though “Phantoms of sight that have no real existence” distort the way, as opposed to the “clear & uniform” moral path, it is in this world we find the “Angel & brute” mixed. One sentence seems to stand out from the rest of this passage, perhaps because Emerson chooses to begin the sentence with a conjunction (especially given Emerson’s usual journal practice of using the ampersand for the word “and,” which makes this sentence seem unusually ornate), and because the sentence has the compacted, weighted feeling of an aphorism: “And Man is an Angel of light walking in the Universe with the dignity of an immortal being.” It seems as though Emerson wants this thought to ride above the entire passage, as though this possibility is eternal above the “dreamy world” of “wild and various aspect.”

In a passage from September 1823, which contains a subtle development in Emerson’s journal writing, he appears to use visual terms in conventional ways to express knowledge:

It is impossible for me to believe that God lighted up the beautiful ray of Genius, to be quenched in a premature & ominous night or to mix its celestial illumination with the lurid fires of malignant and infernal passions. God’s works are the fruits of his character; copies (as ancient philosophy expressed it) of his mind and wishes. One could not venerate him if he were only good. Who could bow down before a God who had infinite instincts of benevolence, & no thought; in whom the Eye of Knowledge was shut; who was kind & good because he knew no better; who was infinitely gentle as brutes are gentle?⁴²

Here Emerson uses expressions of light to refer to knowledge, intellect and genius (or, greatness).

The phrase of interest here is God’s “Eye of Knowledge”; it is less important at this point in

Emerson's journals to notice his (by now) frequent visual imagery than it is to notice that the "Eye of Knowledge" suggests that the eye is connected to, or is necessary for, knowledge. Emerson's repeated associations of "eye" and "knowledge" have become a kind of shorthand, "eye of knowledge" representing a single unit of expression. That God has an "Eye of Knowledge" is not surprising, since nature is an expression of the will of God, and this will is realized through the eye. What may be surprising to readers is that the eye is the conduit of knowledge for God, as Emerson has been re-emphasizing is true for man.

Emerson's report on a sermon by William Ellery Channing in October of 1823 is interesting in what Emerson notices to be the effectiveness of the presentation:

I heard Dr Channing deliver a discourse upon Revelation as standing in comparison with Nature. . . . The language was a transparent medium, conveying with the utmost distinctness, the pictures in his mind, to the minds of his hearers. He considered God's word to be the only expounder of his works, & that Nature had always been found insufficient to teach men the doctrines which Revelation inculcated.⁴³

Channing's "transparent language" is Emerson's goal in oratory, certainly, but also a dilemma of the mind he will deal with through his career: the inability of language to convey reality, or simply that *language* cannot precisely convey *image*. In Channing's view here, God's word, as the only "expounder" of his works, requires the assistance of Revelation to educate (literally, to lead out of darkness) man. Emerson will, in his essays and especially his poetry, attempt to refine his usage toward the end of the condition Sampson Reed considered a "language of things." The reality of the spiritual world will comprise this language of things; or, more accurately, the "purged eye" of the mind will have no need for language in the spiritual world.

On November 23, 1823 Emerson writes:

I find within me a motley array of feelings that have no connection with my clayey frame and I call them my *mind*. Every day of my life, this mind draws a thousand curious conclusions from the different things which it beholds. With a wanton variety which tires of sameness it throws all its thoughts into innumerable lights and changes the fantastic scene by varying its own operations upon it; by combining & separating, by comparing & judging, by remembering and inventing all things. Every one of these little changes within, produces a pleasure; the pleasure of power or of sight. . . . It is a ticket of admission to another world of ineffable grandeur - - to unknown orders of things which are as *real* as they are stupendous. As soon as it has advanced a little in life it opens its eyes to thoughts which tax its whole power, and delight it by their greatness and novelty. These suggest kindred conceptions which give birth to others and thus draw the mind on in a path which it perceives as interminable, and is of interminable joy. To this high favoured intellect is added an intuition that it can never end and that with its choice it can go forward to take the boon of immortal Happiness.⁴⁴

Interestingly here Emerson utilizes his mind to perceive a world of “ineffable grandeur,” and does so through the agency of sight. Indeed, Emerson sounds like a painter, or a photographer, or a film director composing a scene in order to achieve a sense of emotional (as opposed to rational) depth to a seemingly ordinary scene, a “motley array.” The resulting change is pleasure; this pleasure is power or the pleasure of *sight*. Emerson seems to be separating the operation of his mind from the power of vision, as though it is through the power of vision that the “ticket of admission” is purchased. The world of “ineffable grandeur,” Emerson insists, is *real*, just as Sampson Reed (and Swedenborg) insisted that the spiritual world was as real as the material world, with the exception that the spiritual world is permanent; or, as Emerson writes here, is “the boon of immortal Happiness.” Emerson’s sense of the power (and *pleasure*) of vision is a means to a spiritual end in itself; Emerson has, in this passage, separated the power of vision from the accumulation of information in the mind. The distinction is subtle, but significant. As Emerson writes in his journal on January 25, 1824, “the universe to the eyes of ignorance is a shining

chaos. And when the veil of flesh is rent & the eyes of the spirit open, human perception will shrink from the splendour of the spiritual world.”⁴⁵

On December 10, 1824, Emerson, writing on the subject of time and knowledge, makes this observation:

A metaphysician would exhibit a work of magic who should describe all the means in which knowledge is mastered, arranged, & abridged. The arrival at general laws, the connexion of associated principles, the enlargement of meaning in words which permits the grand discovery that hundreds of laborious minds promoted, to be conveyed in a bare epithet, - - would be a picture to astonish & delight. It would also instruct by suggesting the method of using time to most advantage in accumulating wisdom.⁴⁶

Emerson demonstrates the effectiveness of the aphoristic style, which he would strive to master in his essay writing. Moreover, he recognizes the potential of “the enlargement of meaning in words,” which can convey vast knowledge “in a bare epithet” - - this is the value of the aphorism - - which would be a “picture to astonish & delight.” Importantly, Emerson equates the “bare epithet” with a “picture.” recalling his admiration of Channing’s “transparent language.” Here Emerson is thinking, or rather, has assimilated into his thinking a way of moving from a “language of words” to a “language of things.” Emerson follows this passage with these lines by Milton (*Paradise Lost*, II, 146-148):

“To be no more; sad cure; for who would lose
Tho’ full of pain this intellectual being
Those tho’ts that wander thro’ eternity?”

Thus Emerson reenforces the compactness of language to convey thought visually - - “a picture to astonish & delight” - - rather than “laboriously.”

On the same day, Emerson recorded his reaction to “a celebrated English preacher” who, instructing his congregation, “pointed their mind’s eyes to the Recording Angel who waited on the wing . . . to write down some name in all that multitude in his book of Life”:

My friends no Recording Angel that we know of hovers over our assembly, but a greater than an Angel is here. There is one in the midst of us though our eyes see him not who is not a fictitious or imaginary being but who is too great & too glorious for our eyes to bear. There is one here imparting to us the life & sense we at this moment exercise, whose tremendous power set yonder sun in the firmament, & upholds him & us. *You* cannot discern him by the gross orbs of sight but can you not feel the weight of his presence sinking on your heart? does no conscious feeling stir in your bosoms under the eye of your author & God who is here? What doth he here? & how shall we acknowledge the almighty mind?⁴⁷

Emerson recorded this passage separately from the previous entry, though on the same day. He imagines God, the “author,” with an eye over the congregation. When Emerson asks, “how shall we acknowledge the almighty mind?” a rational response would suggest access to, or recognition by, that *mind* through the *eye*. Also of interest here is the repeated use of the term “eye”; rarely, if ever, in his journals is Emerson as repetitious with a single term. This may coincide with the fact that, in the next two weeks, he would, with mixed emotions, enter Divinity School, and soon after, as detailed above, lose the use of his eyes.

Two events in 1826 began a regeneration in Emerson’s thought and mood. In January 1826, he started writing in his journal again; this event alone must have relieved his tension about his future as a theologian and philosopher, if not a pastor. And, on August 19, 1826, Sampson Reed’s book *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* was published. Emerson quickly sought out a copy, and in less than a month, in his journal entry for September 10, 1826, Emerson offers high praise for the book:

Our American press does not often issue such productions as Sampson Reed's observations on the Growth of the mind, a book of such character as I am conscious betrays some pretension even to praise. It has to my mind the aspect of a revelation, such is the wealth & such is the novelty of the truth unfolded in it. It is remarkable for the unity into which it has resolved the various powers, feelings & vocations of men, suggesting to the mind that harmony which it has always a propensity to seek of action and design in the order of Providence in the world.⁴⁸

Likewise, Emerson wrote to his brother William on September 29: "Sampson Reed has printed here & perhaps at N. York a noble pamphlet after my own heart called Observations on the Growth of the Mind. in my poor judgement the best thing since Plato of Plato's kind, for novelty of wealth & truth."⁴⁹ Emerson naturally sent a copy to his most faithful and trusted critic, Aunt Mary, who wholly dismissed it. She responded in her letter dated September 5, 1826, that she found "much triteness, obscurity, and 'swedenishness' in it, and thought its rare parts culled from Wordsworth, who was no Swedenborg."⁵⁰ To this Emerson offers a strong reply in a return letter to Aunt Mary on October 1(?):

But what in the name of all the fairies is the reason you dont like Sampson Reed? What swart star has looked sparely on him? Can anything be more greatly, more wisely writ? Has any modern hand touched [th]e harp of great Nature so rarely? Has any looked so shrewdly into the subtile & concealed connexion of man & nature of earth & heaven? Has any in short produced such curiosity to see the farther progress the remoter results of the caste of intellect to wh[ich] he belongs? I speak for myself and not for another. I believe he must have admirers but I have not seen any. The Sabbath after it came out, Dr Channing delivered a discourse obviously founded upon it. And as to his sect you know they exult in the independent testimony of poor Wordsworth to the same truths which they get from Swedenborg. So what confirmations to what I said about sentiment ruling the roost in these our matchless times.⁵¹

Clarence Hotson observes that Emerson's line "Has any modern hand touched the harp of great nature so rarely?" is most likely taken from a passage in *Growth of the Mind*: "By music is meant . . . the music of the harp of universal nature, which is touched by the rays of the sun, and whose song is the morning, the evening, and the seasons."⁵² But Reed seems to have touched a personal

note in Emerson as well. Emerson's reworking of the passage demonstrates his admiration for Reed's talent, but Emerson's paraphrase also casts Reed as the "rays of the sun," an agent of enlightenment as well as a visual symbol for the highest light found in nature. Emerson's admiration for Reed and his work extends beyond theological musings. He had found another great teacher, and one in a camp on the opposite shore from Unitarianism.

It is unclear when Emerson met Sampson Reed in person for the first time. Emerson made his first trip to the Swedenborg Chapel on January 6, 1835, but it is evident from his journals that he knew Reed personally before this time.⁵³ Emerson had begun reading the *New Jerusalem Magazine*, first published in 1827, searching out articles by Reed. The influence of Swedenborg by this time is seen in Emerson's journal entry for January 30, 1827, in which he uses the term "transcendentalism" for the first time: "Transcendentalism. Metaphysics & ethics look inwards - - and France produces Mad. de Stael; England, Wordsworth; America, Sampson Reed; as well as Germany, Swedenborg."⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that Emerson not only rates Reed in the same class with Wordsworth (thus insuring a connection concerning romanticism), but also esteems Reed as separate from Swedenborg. This may be due to the fact that Emerson had not yet encountered Swedenborg's works firsthand; he only knew Swedenborg through Reed's *Growth of the Mind* and the *New Jerusalem Magazine* articles Reed authored. Still, Emerson clearly regarded Reed as a contemporary theologian, and also, perhaps, it may be possible that Emerson thought of Reed, at this time at least, as a thinker apart from the Swedish mystic. Emerson continues his high estimation of Reed in this entry from May 12, 1830:

It was said of Jesus that "he taught as one having authority"⁵⁵ - - a distinction most palpable. There are a few men in every age I suppose who teach thus. <Sadler> Stubler⁵⁶

the Quaker whom I saw on board the boat in Delaware Bay was one. If Sampson Reed were a talker, he were another.⁵⁷

This seems high praise from Emerson, as he had not yet reached his position of denying the divinity of Jesus. This equation of the abilities of Jesus with Reed (and Sadler, the Quaker), indicates a profound respect for the thinking of Reed; as Emerson notes, Sampson Reed was quiet and reserved, and not one given to lecture, though he had once trained for the ministry but left the Divinity School program uncompleted.

On September 17, 1833, Emerson recorded this impression of Reed:

The true men are ever following an invisible Leader, and have left the responsibility of their acts with God. But the artificial men have assumed their own bonds and can fall back on nothing greater than their finite fortunes . . . empirics with expedients for a few years, reputation instead of character, and fortune instead of wisdom. The true men stand by and let reason argue for them. I talk with Sampson and see it is not him, but a greater than him, “My Father is greater than I.”⁵⁸ Truth speaks by him. (Can my friend wish a greater eulogy?)⁵⁹

By this time Emerson had been reading Swedenborg in English translation, but this passage suggests that he still considered Reed as more than a mouthpiece for Swedenborg. The “Father” from John’s gospel is of course God; in this case it may be read as either God or Swedenborg (the spiritual “Father” of Reed), but it is more likely that, given the context of the entry, Emerson is suggesting that God / “Truth” speaks by Reed.

Soon after returning from his European trip of 1834, Emerson wrote a lengthy first letter to Thomas Carlyle, dated May 14, 1834, which reads in part:

I send herewith a volume of Websters that you may see his Speech on Foots Resolutions, a speech which the Americans have never done praising. I have great doubts whether the book reaches you, as I know not my agents. I shall put with it the little book of my Swedenborgian druggist, of whom I told you.⁶⁰

The book, of course, was Reed's *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*. In Carlyle Emerson found a sympathetic soul to the ideals of the Transcendentalists. Carlyle did in fact read the book, as indicated in this reply, dated August 12, 1834:

I have read in both your Books, at leisure times; and now nearly finished the smaller one. He is a faithful thinker that Swedenborgian Druggist of yours, with really deep Ideas, who makes me too pause and think, were it only to consider what manner of man *he* must be, and what manner of thing, after all, Swedenborgianism must be.⁶¹ "Thro' the smallest window, look well and you can look out into the Infinite."⁶²

The editor of the letters between Emerson and Carlyle, Joseph Slater, adds this note for clarification of Carlyle's position on Swedenborgianism:

In "Count Cagliostro," published in *Fraser's Magazine* in August, 1833, Carlyle had catalogued Swedenborgians with such quacks as Mesmerists and Illuminati. Later he confessed in a letter to J. J. G. Wilkinson that he had thought Swedenborg "an amiable but insane visionary. . . . But I have been rebuked already; a little book, by one Sampson Reed, of Boston, in New England, which some friend sent hither, taught me that a Swedenborgian may have thoughts of the calmest kind on the deepest things; that in short, I did *not* know Swedenborg, and ought to know him." This letter, which was quoted in the *New Jerusalem Magazine*, XIII (August 1840) . . . caused an English reprint of *The Growth of the Mind*.⁶³

Emerson continues his promotion of Sampson Reed, and (by extension Swedenborgianism) in another letter to Carlyle, dated November 20, 1834:

I am glad you like Sampson Reed & that he has inspired some curiosity respecting his church. Swedenborgianism, if you should be fortunate in your first meetings, has many points of attraction for you: for instance this article "The Poetry of the Old Church is the Reality of the New"; which is to be literally understood, for they esteem, in common with all the Trismegisti; the Natural World as strictly the symbol or exponent of the Spiritual, & part for part; the animals to be incarnations of certain affections; & scarce a popular expression esteemed figurative, but they affirm to be the simplest statement of fact. Then is their whole theory of social relations - - both in & out of the body - - most philosophical, & tho' at variance with the popular theology, selfevident.⁶⁴

Five days later, from Concord, Emerson writes to the Reverend James Freeman Clarke of Louisville, Kentucky: "Have you read Sampson Reed's *Growth of the Mind*? I rejoice to be

contemporary with that man & cannot wholly despair of society in which he lives. There must be some oxygen yet”⁶⁵ These comments from Emerson show the influence of Reed on his thinking, even as he was lecturing and undertaking preparation for his own first book. By this time Emerson had been reading Coleridge extensively, particularly *Aids to Reflection* and *The Friend*, and the influence of these works are fundamental to *Nature*. Kenneth Cameron writes that “in *Nature*, Emerson’s most complete presentation of Transcendentalism, the evidence . . . points to Coleridge as the background or necessary setting for the lustres drawn from Goethe, Swedenborg, Oegger, Reed, Alcott, and others.”⁶⁶ These considerations are, of course, neither to be denied nor diminished. But what has not been fully recognized is the effect Samson Reed and Swedenborgianism continued to have on Emerson, fifteen years after first hearing Reed speak. Emerson recorded in his journal in July 1835:

Let not the voluptuary dare to judge of literary far less of moral questions. Let him wait until the blindness that belongs to pollution has passed from his eyes.

We all have an instinct that a good man good & wise shall be able to say intuitively i.e. from God what is true & great & beautiful. Never numbers but the simple & wise shall judge. Not the Wartons & Drakes but some divine savage like Webster, Wordsworth, & Reed whom neither the town or the college ever made shall say that we shall all believe. How we thirst for a natural thinker!⁶⁷

And, on May 19, 1836, shortly after the death of his brother Edward, Emerson records this passage, which seems to demonstrate how close his deepest emotions are to his vision and philosophy:

I find myself slowly, after this helpless mourning. I remember states of mind that perhaps I had long lost before this grief, the native mountains whose tops reappear after we have traversed many a mile of weary region from home. Them shall I ever revisit? I refer now to last evening’s lively remembrance of the scattered company who have ministered to my highest wants. Edward Stabler, Peter Hunt, Sampson Reed, my peasant Tarbox, Mary Rotch, Jonathan Phillips, A. B. Alcott - - even Murat has a claim - - a strange class, plain & wise, whose charm to me is wonderful, how elevating! how far was their voice from the

voice of vanity of display, of interest, of tradition! They are to me what the Wanderer in the Excursion is to the poet. And Wordsworth's total value is of this kind. They are described in the lines at the end of the Yarrow Revisited. Theirs is the true light of all our day. They are the argument for the spiritual world for their spirit is it. Nothing is impossible since such communion has already been. Whilst we hear them speak, how frivolous are the distractions of fortune! and the voice of fame is as unassuming as the tinkle of the passing sleigh bell.⁶⁸

The years since graduation from Harvard had been extraordinarily trying ones for Emerson, and through it all he managed to deepen his understanding of himself and his world, in order to come to what he considered to be his true subject: a new philosophy of the mind. The coinciding experiences of his recovery from near blindness and the publication of *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* sparked in Emerson a more intense sense of purpose. Indeed, it seems, in retrospect, a matter of the right book finding the right person at exactly the right time. Robert Richardson writes:

After his eye troubles [in 1825], Emerson would never again be indifferent to eyes, sight, and vision. Metaphors of vision run all through his writing. Even here Reed was his teacher. "The understanding is the eye," Reed writes, "with simply the power of discovering the light; but reason is the eye whose powers have been enlarged by exercise and experience." The growth of a mind is for Reed an educational process, not a self-regarding self-development but growth in "active usefulness." *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* showed Emerson what could be hoped for; it was a powerful personal testament by a contemporary, a gospel of the present moment.⁶⁹

Emerson's own growth between 1825 and 1836 was spurred by many sources and experiences, but still Sampson Reed had laid the groundwork for the aesthetic, if not thematic, philosophical exercise to emerge from Emerson. Even as he was completing *Nature*, Reed was still on his mind. On June 28, 1836, he wrote to his brother William: "My little book is nearly done. Its title is 'Nature.' Its contents will not exceed in bulk Sampson Reed's 'Growth of the Mind.'⁷⁰

Notes

1. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 17.
2. Ibid.
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Volume II 1822-1826*. Eds. William H. Gilman, Alfred R. Ferguson, Merrell R. Davis (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 238.
4. Richardson, 63.
5. Ibid., 239.
6. “something great and immeasurable”
7. Gilman, et al, *Journals II*, 239-40.
8. Ibid., 240-41.
9. Emerson was at this time operating a school at Roxbury.
10. Emerson, *Journals II*, 241-42.
11. Eleanor M. Tilton, ed. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume VII 1807-1844* (New York: Columbia Press, 1990), 131-32.
12. Emerson, *Journals II*, 316.
13. Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Young Emerson’s Transcendental Vision: An Exposition of His World View With an Analysis of the Structure, Backgrounds, and Meaning of Nature* (1836) (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1971), 37.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 38-39.
16. Ibid., 78.
17. Ibid., 46.
18. Edward Waldo Emerson, *Centenary Edition: The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), 295.

19. Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 110.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 110-11.
22. Ibid., 112.
23. Edward Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in Concord: A Memoir* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, Limited, 1889), 163.
24. Ibid., 164.
25. Ibid., 113.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Quoted in Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 112.
29. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 112.
30. Evelyn Barish, "The Moonless Night: Emerson's Crisis of Health, 1825-1827." *Emerson Centenary Essays*, ed. Joel Myerson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 4.
31. Ibid., 5.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 6-7.
34. Ibid., 7.
35. Richardson, 63.
36. Ibid., 72.
37. Emerson, *Journals II*, 38.
38. Ibid., 81.
39. Ibid., 144-45.
40. Ibid., 145.

41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 158
43. Ibid., 160-61.
44. Ibid., 55-56.
45. Ibid., 203.
46. Ibid., 303.
47. Ibid., 303-04.
48. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume III, 1826-1832*. Eds. William H. Gilman and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1963), 44-45.
49. Ralph L. Rusk, ed., *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume I 1813-1835* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 176.
50. Ibid., 173, note 20.
51. Tilton, *Letters VII*, 152-53.
52. Clarence Paul Hotson, "Emerson and Swedenborg." Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1929, 131.
53. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Volume V 1835-1838*. Ed. Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 4.
54. Emerson, *Journals III*, 70.
55. Matthew 7:28-29: "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, / for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."
56. Editor's note: "The manuscript reads "Stubler" but Emerson must have meant Edward Stabler (1769-1831), who was both a druggist and a Quaker preacher in Alexandria, VA." Gilman and Ferguson, *Journals III*, 185.
57. Emerson, *Journals III*, 185.
58. John 14:28: "You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I."

59. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Volume IV 1832-1834*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 43-44.
60. Joseph Slater, ed., *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 100.
61. *Ibid.*, 101-02.
62. Carlyle's quote comes from Book I, chapter IX, of his novel *Sartor Resartus* (1834).
63. Slater, 102.
64. *Ibid.*, 109.
65. Tilton, *Letters VII*, 230.
66. *Ibid.*, 200.
67. Emerson, *Journals V*, 60.
68. *Ibid.*, 160-61.
69. Richardson, 71.
70. Quoted in Hotson, 156.

Chapter 3

Nature and the Visual Metaphor

In September, 1836, Emerson's "little book," *Nature*, was published anonymously by James Munroe & Co., Boston. True to his word to his brother William, Emerson's book finished at 95 pages, similar in length to *Growth of the Mind*. In *Nature*, Emerson employs a system of visual metaphoric expression that challenges Aristotle's qualification of making effective metaphor. According to Aristotle, "to make good metaphors implies a eye for resemblances."¹ This suggests a strictly comparative view of metaphor. Emerson uses creative metaphors to bring component terms together in such a way as to create new semantic significances from their interaction. I. A. Richards could have had Emerson in mind when writing, "Words are not a medium in which to copy life. Their true work is to restore life itself to order."² Emerson writes in *Nature* that "the visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world."³ Throughout *Nature*, Emerson tests the limits of the "invisible world" creating visually determined metaphoric expressions.

A clue to the book's intention is suggested by the epigram from Plotinus on the book's title page:⁴

Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know.

The significance of this epigram is twofold. The statement from Plotinus indicates something about the book's approach to its method. Also, however, this statement - - particularly this translation⁵ - - allows for a metaphorical inversion that, on close inspection, reveals a fundamental quality of Emerson's vision of "nature." The epigram Emerson chose can be broken into three

meaningful clauses, establishing a fundamental position regarding nature: that nature is an “image or imitation” of “wisdom”; “wisdom” is the “last thing of the soul”; and “nature” is a thing which *does*, “but [does] not know.” In the first statement, nature is an *image or imitation* of wisdom. Nature does not comprise wisdom, nor does comprehension of nature equate with wisdom. Rather, nature displays the *form* of wisdom, which is impressed upon it, or through it. Next, if “nature” is understood to be the subject carried over from the previous clause, we may read the second clause as “[nature] is the last thing of the soul.” Emerson intends “last” to be understood as *fundamental* or *essential*, not final or suggestive of an ending. Emerson does not posit an end of understanding or seeing, but a transparent quality of nature to be seen through to its underlying forms, themselves always changing according to the changing mind of man; this has already been demonstrated in Emerson’s borrowings from Sampson Reed. Thus, we read here that nature - - or wisdom - - is a fundamental quality of the soul, and perhaps that the soul has a similar transparency, and the will of God works its impression upon it. Finally, “nature being a thing which doth only do, but know not” moves the initial subject of the entire statement, nature, to the status of object: nature is a thing, and this thing does (acts), but does not know that it acts. It is devoid of intent. In this epigram, then, three assertions are made:

Nature is an image of wisdom.
Nature / wisdom is the fundamental quality of the soul.
Nature acts, but does not know that it acts.

Of these three assertions, only the first may be considered metaphorically. That wisdom is a fundamental quality of the soul may be taken as a statement of belief. In a semantic sense, it is a literal statement. For usage of the term *literal statement*, I defer to Carl Hausman’s definition, “an expression that conforms to conventional standards of usage and, where appropriate, to direct

testing by standards of truth and falsity.”⁶ Likewise, the statement that nature acts but does not know that it acts may be taken as a statement declaring a philosophical stance. But the first statement from Plotinus - - “Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom” - - comprises two separate components, *nature* and *wisdom*, and expresses a condition about one (nature) through the meaning of another (wisdom). In this example nature, as the subject of the sentence, is compared with wisdom. Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote, “As to metaphorical expression, that is a great excellence in style, when it is used with propriety, for it gives you two ideas for one.”⁷ Though this is only one possibility of metaphoric expression, all metaphor must necessarily contain two components, and in I. A. Richards’ terms, wisdom in this case is the *vehicle* (that term which anchors the metaphor through its stability), and nature is the *tenor* (that term which gains new significance through the metaphoric act).⁸ This new significance is a product of the *interaction* of the two terms, or concepts, introduced by the metaphor, as opposed to a metaphor based on resemblance. Generally speaking, one may think of nature as the concrete term here, and wisdom as abstract. This is the cleverness of Plotinus’ statement, and the utility of Emerson’s choice: by allowing *nature* to act as tenor, which I believe to be a fair reading of the statement, nature becomes the term with less concretion than wisdom. Thus, nature is the *imitation* of wisdom - - is there any other way this idea may be expressed? - - and the metaphor accomplishes one goal of inquiry into the surface materiality of nature. If nature is an imitation of wisdom, do we know something about wisdom that may clarify our understanding of nature? This seems less likely than the prospect of what we know about wisdom *mystifying* our idea of nature. This is the starting point of Emerson’s investigation. Nature and mind (wisdom) come together, and it is the conventional idea of nature that is being destabilized as a subject of study and, as the word does

by the end of Plotinus' original statement, becomes an object, and by implication also a condition of the soul.

That nature is stated as being an *image* of wisdom is significant in itself. Emerson has utilized a single statement comprising three separate components which move the institutionalized conception of nature-as-subject to an equation with a fundamental quality of the soul; finally nature is established as objective as well, preconceptual materiality existing without knowledge or ego. Moreover, in the first five words - - "Nature is but an *image*" - - Emerson asserts a basis for formulating a philosophy dependant upon conditions of seeing as essential to his task. Emerson has chosen his epigram wisely; this form and idea will be repeated early in *Nature* in ways essential to the reading of Emerson's metaphors concerning vision.

The text of *Nature* begins with Emerson's six line poem, comprising three rhymed couplets of iambic tetrameter.⁹ This form has a particular importance for Emerson; in the *Poetics*, Aristotle writes that "the iambic and the trochaic tetrameter are stirring measures, the latter being akin to dancing, the former expressive of action."¹⁰ The introductory poem is of key significance; the poem contains, in form and idea, instructional keys for reading the text:

A subtle chain of countless rings
The next unto the farthest brings;
The eye reads omens where it goes,
And speaks all languages the rose;
And, striving to be man, the worm
Mounts through all the spires of form.¹¹

Though the poem is composed as a single, complete sentence, it breaks into couplets that are positioned in relation to the other couplets with semicolons, rather than periods, suggesting a thematic development in the lines. The rhythmic regularity gives the lines a vibrancy, like a pulse;

again, the reader is not cued by punctuation to stop at the end of each couplet, but encouraged by the semicolon to carry on with only a pause. Emerson's formal attitude of three related assertions has been observed in his choice of epigram; here, he keeps the form intact.

The initial couplet,

A subtle chain of countless rings
The next unto the farthest brings;

reveals a metaphor in a context bordering on the abstract. The "countless rings" might be taken, literally as a spiral form; Emerson does specify that the chain is infinite. Therefore, a chain of uncountable rings may be an adequate paraphrase of this idea. The "subtle chain" suggests the form of a spiral, circles which do not quite close on themselves. Also, a chain that is subtle may be read as a chain that is *unperceived*; and an unperceived chain (as opposed to *unseen*, which is not a paraphrase or substitute for subtle) suggests an *image* of a chain.

The second line completes the couplet, and the idea: "The next unto the farthest brings." This line is compacted so as to leave the object of "next" unclear, though we must assume it to be the rings of the previous line, especially since the line continues to state that the "next (ring) unto the farthest (ring) brings," suggestive of a spiraling form. Clearly here we have an imagistic chain, made up of rings that bring something from the *next* ring to the farthest ring. Also, more importantly, we have a Platonic construction of ideal forms. The "form" (whatever it may be) is relayed from one ring to the next, along an imaginative, countless chain of rings. But what is being brought? Perhaps in the context of this couplet Emerson wants to convey the idea of continual generation; leaving the object of *brings* out of the line suggests not intentional ambiguity, but a compression of words not only to fit a specific metrical format, but also to assert

a generalized idea of the continual evolution of forms. This first couplet is the most abstract, and necessarily so, as will be seen.

The second of the couplets,

The eye reads omens where it goes,
And speaks all languages the rose;

suggests more concrete images: *eye* and *rose*. The image of an oval, literal eye recalls the shape of the rings in the previous couplet. So, the literal eye is connected visually to the imagistic chain, suggesting a metaphoric image of dual purpose: it lends a visual aspect to the “chain,” but also implies a nonliteral interpretation of the eye with which it is associated. This is a specific quality of Emerson’s visual metaphors.

That the eye “reads omens” is deceptively literal, in that the phrase is contained in a single line. But the completion of the idea - - “and speaks all languages the rose” - - makes this expression a figurative one. To begin, how can an eye speak? What quality of speaking can an eye appropriate? Here, the eye is given the ability to speak, which of course does not belong to it in a literal sense. A literal interpretation of “speak” would include an articulation of meaningful sounds; speech and speaking is a verbal experience. The eye can only appropriate the verbal experience in a figurative sense by perceiving it, through language or symbol. The eye may perceive a language in the sense that the eye *recognizes* a particular language; in this case, the language is a ‘language of the rose,’ so the eye perceives a symbolic language of material nature, a literal rose, and nonliteral “nature” is the object that is perceived by the mind and being ‘spoken’, in a sense, in the brain. The “omens” read by the eye are the forms of nature, which Emerson will describe later in *Nature* as “hieroglyphs.” These hieroglyphs are “read” by the eye

and spoken in the mind's ear: external nature meets the individual mind to complete unique, figurative acts in a literal environment.

In consideration of the third couplet,

And, striving to be man, the worm
Mounts through all the spires of form.

the semantic ground is literal ground: the ground through which the worm crawls, and in which the human form decays. But from this decay the worm feeds, grows, and regenerates, in the sense of reproduction (and evolution), thus mounting through all the “spires of form.” This final couplet is set in the realm of material nature, twice removed from the “subtle chains” of the first couplet and one remove from the eye that reads and speaks the “language” of the rose. Thus Emerson creates a formal construct of three components: the pattern of the poem may be seen as a model for the physical eye reading the poem, or perhaps for the fact of “reading” as a visual phenomenon. It suggests a circle inside a circle inside a circle, complementary to the shape of the eye: a round pupil inside a round iris placed in a round socket. Perhaps the subtlety of the “chain” is its infinite extension.

Another pattern is evident here: a progression in the couplets from the abstract to the physical. The worm's “striving” is not understood as ambition, but as necessity, just as with “the next unto the farthest brings,” the movement is upward progression. As the worm dines on the flesh of decaying man, the upward mounting also represents generation, which leads to “mounting through all the spires of form.” Emerson creates a formal poem with an ending that reconnects to its beginning, thus emulating the pattern of movement in nature and is, by Aristotle's standard, “expressive of action.” In this six line introductory verse, Emerson encapsulates the form of his

philosophy and, in a sense, establishes some of its key terms - - nature, the reading eye, the language of the rose, the spires of form.

In the opening paragraph of the essay, Emerson makes his declaration of spiritual independence: “The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”¹² Emerson is interested in *relation*; his desire is to interact with nature directly through intuition and individual experience, not through the mediating texts of preceding generations. Emerson’s separation from Unitarianism had occurred on just these grounds. The “original” relation he seeks for his generation may be taken in both senses: original, as in a unique, individual experience of nature through revelation, and original in the sense that this relation will be first, or a primary relation. In the following paragraph Emerson states, “Undoubtably we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. . . . nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?”¹³ A condition of Emerson’s declaration, and that of like-minded thinkers, is the responsibility of inquiring into the design of nature. He has implied, in the opening poem, that the truth of nature is in its form, which is “describing its own design”; its truth is self-evident. Even though the form of nature is a self-evident truth, this is only part of the inquiry. Emerson wishes to question “the great apparition” (or, “imitation or illusion”): “to what *end* is nature?” Emerson’s question carries the presupposition that nature has an end, or a usefulness. This usefulness may be derived through individual experience. The significance of this usefulness is determined by the state of development of the individual mind; he writes, “For every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to

grimmiest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or mourning piece.”¹⁴ It is experience itself that brings the individual into an “original relation” to nature. Emerson describes this experience in the most densely packed metaphor in the essay.

Since his eyesight problems in 1826, Emerson would always remain sensitive to the significance of the eye and capacity for sight as fundamental to the individual experience of nature. Emerson proclaims the glories of being in the woods, layering visually descriptive phrase upon phrase in this passage like paint laid thick on a canvas:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. Almost I fear to think how glad I am. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith.¹⁵

Emerson never forgets the importance of his own vision: “There I feel nothing can befall me in life, - - no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes) which nature cannot repair.”¹⁶ Again, Emerson asserts the primacy of the healthy eye; this is both a personal and a philosophical consideration. He continues with a complexity of metaphors that defines the semantic, if not organic, conditions of his work: “Standing on the bare ground, - - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”¹⁷ Emerson’s usage of the phrase “infinite space” suggests a subjective point of view, as well as an emotive qualifier. However, he is still standing on the bare ground; the writer is stretched from the bare - - essential and unadorned - - ground, “uplifted” by the onset of the transcendental experience “into infinite space,” and subjectivism vanishes. Emerson has, in effect,

dismissed point of view from the experience he wants to describe. But how can one describe an experience without a perspective, or an angle of vision? Emerson does this through a particular metaphorical usage unique to his writing.

We can be certain that the first sentence - - “Standing on the bare ground, - - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism disappears” - - is not a literal statement, but it is also not metaphoric; that is, the semantic field of the statement’s signifying terms do not shift. Emerson has established a frame beginning with the next statement, which may be considered as a metaphoric complex with four component statements:

I become a transparent eye-ball.
I am nothing.
I see all.
I am part or particle of God.

It is a metaphoric complex, similar to the opening poem; indeed, it may be read like a four line, free verse poem. Though many of the expressions are figurative in nature, the complex is metaphoric in that the significance of the experience, through the significations of the terms used to describe it, change their conditions of signification. Like Emerson’s “true theory” of nature, the significance of this complex is self-evident, and like his earlier observation of nature, it is “describing its own design.” In the first of these assertions, it is clear that the experience has changed the subject, and has itself *become* a transparent eye-ball. The subjective “I” is still present, but the statement is one of *becoming*, and not exclusively *being*. The lack of a more temporally determined verb (such as “have become” a transparent eye-ball; or “am” a transparent eyeball) suggests that the experience exists out of time. This is suggested as well by the paradox presented by the phrase “transparent eye-ball.” Emerson utilizes this form often to express

through language that direct experience, or intuition, which *escapes* language; the paradoxical form is itself a semantic impossibility. Obviously, this is a figurative statement; literally speaking, a transparent eye (assuming a transparent retina as well) is blind. Something of the quality of the “I” that is the subject of this expression is shared with the idea of a “transparent eye-ball.” The semantic ground of the subject has shifted, as has the semantic ground of the eye-ball, though it seems contradictory for a term with no literal signification to be able to shift, since it has no stable semantic force. Since “all mean egotism” has disappeared, the assumption is that there is no “I” capable of a subjective experience. But while it may seem mere word play to suggest a double meaning of “I / eye” in this expression, it does help untangle the signification of the subject. That is, the semantic ground of identity of the “I” has become an “eye”; thus, *tension* is created by this part of the expression. The term *tension* is generally associated with Monroe Beardsley and I. A. Richards; Carl Hausman offers his definition:

A metaphor expresses its meaning through a tension, through some form of opposition, strain, or conflict of meaning with themselves or their context. It should be emphasized that as used here, tension does not specifically refer to a psychological condition. Although the condition of tension might be felt, the feeling is not the condition. What is important is the negative dimension, or the incongruity attributable to metaphor, which is a structural condition.¹⁸

Hausman’s definition of the term *tension* is helpful in two ways: first, it emphasizes the incongruity, or the juxtaposition of terms necessary for the metaphoric expression; and second, it recognizes this as a structural condition. Hausman goes on to comment that Aristotle’s comparison view of metaphor limits readings of opposable terms and seeks to find the common ground linking the terms of metaphor.¹⁹ The terms “I” and “eye” are connected primarily through their phonetic properties; also, though the eye is the physical organ which determines sight and

perspective, and accepts information to be arranged and connected by the brain, it cannot be said to have any substantial connection to the “I” that is “*ego*,” the central expression of self-identity. The terms, when considered in this way, open the semantic field for several possible readings of significance. Since it has been earlier suggested that the eye perceives experience, it may not be too far afield to suggest that the “I” to “eye” *integration* has created for the reader an experience without a subject.

Integration is another term Hausman defines in a way that is particularly useful in a structural consideration of metaphoric components:

The kind of whole or togetherness of parts presented by a metaphor is an integration rather than a synthesis. The claim that a metaphor integrates rather than synthesizes is crucial. . . . A synthesis submerges parts for the sake of the whole. Parts lose their independent meanings and are taken up into the whole. Their identities are lost. On the other hand, an integration orders parts so that they contribute to the whole without losing their individual integrities. They retain their significances and also participate in the significance of the whole.²⁰

Hausman’s understanding of *integration* is especially helpful in my consideration of Emerson’s visual metaphors, because it allows Emerson’s individual terms, carefully chosen for their visual properties, to retain their independence and exploit their double meanings. That is, the integration view permits Emerson’s visual terms to locate the active power of the expression in the eye, while maintaining a significant connection with the object of scrutiny, which lets Emerson’s metaphors eliminate subjectivism in considerations of nature. This quality is significant to Emerson’s metaphoric style.

Just as the integration of “I” and “eye” constitutes a figurative expression, so too does the phrase “transparent eye-ball.” A surface reading suggests an expression of pure spiritual, or emotive, experience as opposed to cognitive experience. Emerson might have said simply ‘I

become an eye-ball', or some other variation, without the complicating qualifier "transparent."

What can be seen by a transparent eye? Or, in what sense is the idea of 'seeing' intended? Truly, nothing can be seen by a transparent eye; thus, if the transparent eye sees, it sees only in a figurative sense. Perhaps *perceives* is a closer approximation; as Vivian Hopkins notes, this term is significant for Emerson:

perception, with Emerson, denotes not merely the reception of an object on the brain, but a realization by the mind of that object's significance. Furthermore, before one can attain that perception, his inner eye must first be opened. To discover the spirit in objects - - in Emersonian sense, to "perceive" it - - represents a long step toward interpretation.²¹

The phrase "transparent eye-ball" is an oxymoron, but the condition suggests some kind of semantic connection, perhaps one of negation. Were this phrase considered only as a contradiction of terms, it would be meaningless. But within the framework of the entire passage, we know the phrase to be meaningful. It suggests nothingness, or a condition of experience without subject; this is a specific Emersonian "condition of seeing." The "transparent eye-ball" phrase is, semantically, *unparaphrasable*. Hausman follows Stanley Cavell in his distinction of this term:

The interdependence of meaning units in a metaphor is one of the conditions for the unparaphrasability of metaphorical expressions. . . . Suggesting what the new significance is that arises can be prompted, though not exhausted, by interpretations that include comparisons. However, if an interpretation proposed as a paraphrase is offered as an equivalent, it will fail, as the meanings of metaphors are bound to their terms as they work together uniquely. We cannot expect to understand the significance of a metaphor by systematically eliminating all but previously recognized common features in the systems of meanings that its terms bring together.²²

In consideration of the semantic change in the subject of the previous sentence of Emerson's complex, we can read the next statement - - "I am nothing" - - with more clarity. In fact, the statement seems to serve the twofold purpose of reaffirming Emerson's goal in the previous

statement - - to suggest an experience without a subject - - and to demonstrate what the “transparent eye-ball” has done to the subjective “I.” Again, the double meaning “I / eye” is present; the last expression of the previous statement reaffirms the condition of the first semantic component of this statement. Literally, “I” as subject cannot be “nothing”; only the “I / eye” semantic integration can have meaning here. And, of course, a transparent eye *is* (or appears as) “nothing” to the literal eye; it would be simply invisible, or *unperceivable*, a merely figurative expression.

The next statement, “I see all,” again depends on the “I / eye” semantic integration. “Eye see[s] all” suggests omnipotence, as does a literal reading of “*I* see all.” Emerson’s conflation of “I / eye” is not a systematic substitution of one term for another. This relationship is metaphoric in itself. It has the quality of unparaphrasability; “eye” cannot be the locus of perspective, nor can it be a signifier of ego. “I” is perceptual only as a subjective presence. The dialogic expression “I / eye” is an integration of terms that opens a new semantic field of play; neither term negates meaning associations of the other. “Eye” does not deny the subjectivism of the identifier “I.” Rather, the two combine in a manner which eliminates the *necessity* for subjectivism in intuitive experience. Likewise, “I” incorporates the perceptive capacity of cognition without perspective. This unique condition of seeing qualifies the verb “see” in the “I see all” statement. The “all” to be seen is not comprehensive; rather, it is infinite. A close parallel may be an imagined idea of the eye looking at itself from the inside out. There is no perspective or limitation to perception when the “I” is “uplifted into infinite space.” “I see all,” in the context of this four line frame, is a linguistic representation of indefinable experience, a state of being without “being.” Emerson’s genius can be seen in a pragmatic sense; outside of the context of the essay, the statement “I see

all” acts as a literal utterance. But the semantic field has changed the literal meanings of “I,” “see,” and “all,” so that this statement can only be read as metaphor in this context, just as the previous two statements cannot be read literally, but only figuratively.

I have been concentrating on the first three of the four “I” statements of Emerson’s metaphoric complex, but I cannot dismiss the prefacing clause of the final statement: “The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.” The terms “currents” and “circulate” suggest fluidity, and there seems to be no difficulty in taking “Universal Being” as God, or rather, a universal *state* of being, which coincides with the state of being verbs “am” in lines two and four, and the condition of seeing verb “see” as qualified in line two. This preface sets up the fourth line in the complex: “I am part or particle of God.” I have already noted the continuing significance of the expanded “I / eye” semantic field.

The phrase “part or particle” suggests that “part” and “particle” share some qualities, that the terms are related but not equivalent (Emerson’s phrase does not suggest “part and/or particle,” for instance). Later in the essay, Emerson writes, “Every particular in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the whole.”²³ The “part” component of the expression identifies the “I” as an invested constituent of God; the “particle” component lends to the expression the idea of movement (fluidity, current, circulation) of a part without limitation or specification. That is, the “I” is not a replaceable, extractable piece, but an indefinable magnitude of God. “Part or particle” serves grammatically as a predicate nominative, qualified by the prepositional phrase “of God.” If the predicate nominative is dismissed in favor of the qualifying phrase, the resulting “I am of God” is a no less appropriate statement, missing only the quality of limitation by degree. Thus, “I am of

God,” or “‘I / eye’ am of God” may lead us back to the first statement of the complex, in which the subjective “I” *becomes* (changes) into an “eye.” Thus, a pattern of fluid change, and endless spiraling, emerges:

I become eye.

I am nothing (no/thing).

Eye see (perceive) all (infinite space and time).

I am of God / Eye of God.

I am God (Universal Being).

I am no thing (no rational presence).

I am part or particle of God (intuition).

Within the framework of these four lines, Emerson establishes qualifications of God as Universal Being, and qualifies his own condition of seeing in relation to perceiving that which cannot be perceived in any literal sense. The *frame* created by the metaphor is a fundamental aspect of its understanding. I follow Max Black’s determination of this quality: “A metaphorical statement has two distinct subjects The duality of reference is marked by the contrast between the metaphorical statement’s *focus* (the word or words used nonliterally) and the surrounding literal *frame*.”²⁴ The frame removes literal consideration of the terms inside it and, as a cycling metaphoric expression, displays the impossibility of language to capture the experience. In the chapter titled “Discipline,” Emerson writes, “Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it. An action is the perfection and publication of thought. A right action seems to fill the eye, and to be related to all nature.”²⁵ Thus Emerson finds new metaphors to try to express action through language; this

qualifies the patterns of his thinking as an essential element for understanding his text both as an inquiry into a philosophical proposition and as visual phenomena.

In the chapter “Beauty,” Emerson takes up the topic of aesthetics in nature: “Such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye, that the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves*; a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, grouping.”²⁶ Emerson distinguishes between “the constitution of all things” and “the plastic power of the eye,” without privileging either entity. Both qualities are necessary for aesthetic appreciation. Emerson believes that the constitution of nature has, as a fundamental quality, the power to give us pleasure for the sake of *itself*, not as a willed action of nature, but part of the essence of nature. Nature, in and of itself, is beauty; he notes that “the ancient Greeks called the world [Kosmos], beauty.”²⁷ Emerson also points out that “primary forms” give us delight; he does not state, but does imply, a distinction between primary and secondary forms. Perhaps a secondary form might be art, meaning artifice, as in a later statement in the same chapter: “A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature.”²⁸ But Emerson does specify that this pleasure provided by nature is derived “from outline, color, motion, and grouping,” so he does determine in some sense a set of aesthetic criteria. This recalls Sampson Reed’s commentary regarding the aesthetics of nature: “I can see no rhymes in nature, and hardly blank verse, but a happy assemblage of living objects, not in straight lines and at a fixed distance, but springing up in God’s own order, which by its apparent want of design, leaves on the heart an image of its essential innocence and humility.”²⁹ Reed is satisfied to leave nature’s aesthetic to “God’s own order,” indeed acknowledging its beauty by its *want* of design, and not willing to inquire into nature’s “innocence

and humility.” Emerson, however, is interested in a more empirical evaluation of the beauty of nature, and how this quality is comprehended.

As has been stated, Emerson considers the apprehension of nature’s beauty to require both the “constitution of all things” and “the plastic power of the human eye.” Regarding this apprehension he writes:

This [pleasure from nature] seems partly owing to the eye itself. The eye is the best of artists. By the mutual action of its structure and of the laws of light, perspective is produced, which integrates every mass of objects, of what character soever, into a well colored and shaded globe, so that where the particular objects are mean and unaffecting, the landscape which they compose, is round and symmetrical. And as the eye is the best composer, so light is the first of painters.³⁰

Emerson is writing here about the eye, and seeing, in a literal sense, as opposed to the condition of seeing defined earlier by his “transparent eye-ball.” The eye here is real, and is effective due to its own structure and to the laws of light. From this, *perspective* is produced, which integrates the elements before the eye into a landscape “round and symmetrical,” an imitation of the eye’s own structure. Here again is a sense of Emerson’s statement appearing to be self-evident. The structure of the eye forms beauty in its own image. The perspective produced by the eye is unique to the eye; the eye fits Reed’s “happy assemblage of living objects” into its own form. The “laws of light” compose a landscape in a process Emerson metaphorically describes as painting.

The metaphor expressed in the final statement of the quoted passage is one of comparison, and agrees with a model offered by Aristotle:

Metaphor is the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is, proportion. . . . Analogy or proportion is when the second term is to the first as the fourth to the third. We may then use the fourth for the second, or the second for the fourth. Sometimes too we qualify the metaphor by adding the term to which the proper word is relative. Thus the cup

is to Dionysus as the shield to Ares. The cup may, therefore, be called ‘the shield of Dionysus,’ and the shield ‘the cup of Ares.’³¹

Therefore, in Emerson’s expression “as the eye is the best composer, so light is the first of painters,” the components may be transferred. Aristotle writes further, in *Rhetoric*, “There are four kinds of metaphor, and of these the metaphor from proportion (a : b :: c : d) is the most attractive”³² Also, it is important to note in this discussion Aristotle’s comment in *Poetics* that “the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.”³³ Returning to Emerson’s expression, according to Aristotle’s formula,

eye (a): composer (b) :: light (c) : painter (d)

demonstrates transference; reversing the terms to their original associations:

eye (a): light (c) :: composer (b) : painter (d)

yields literal, rather than metaphoric significance, in that the eye requires light to see, and the painter is also a composer to render order from his environment according to his perspective.

Literal meaning is evident because the semantic fields of “eye,” “light,” “composer,” and “painter” are not required to expand for the sake of comprehension. It is important to note, however, that Emerson is not interested in resemblance or imitation. In this case, Emerson’s metaphor is not remarkable in form, but Emerson is able to place the eye at the center of significance, both literal and metaphoric. Again, Emerson’s preference for the eye as the locus of experience seems prompted, at least in part, by his own experiences of 1825-26: “The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough.”³⁴ And, his own experience with impaired vision seems to inspire one of the more florid passages in *Nature*:

I have seen the spectacle of morning from the hill-top over against my house, from day-break to sun-rise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in a sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. How does Nature deify us with a few and cheap elements! Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous.³⁵

In the “Language” chapter of *Nature*, Emerson writes that “words are signs of natural facts.”³⁶

In doing so he asserts that words are not things, but signs of things; there is a correspondence between words and nature. For Emerson, the separation of words and things is not a quality of language, but a result of disharmony with nature:

Because of this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts, savages, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures. As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until in its infancy, when it is all poetry; or, all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols. The same symbols are found to make the original elements of all languages.³⁷

Emerson’s speculation takes him back to a time when words were things, and not disconnected from their natural import. This assumption of language - - or all languages, according to Emerson - - as having risen from a direct connection between a word and its fact suggests that, initially, language was a pictorial creation, a visual phenomenon, and that conversation was more a physically active than verbal expression. Here Emerson considers savages, “who have only what is necessary” and “converse in figures.” How is a conversation of this type to take place? If Emerson intends this to be a literal statement, we must assume “converse” to indicate an exchange of information, and “figures” to indicate a plastic representation of an actual thing. However, “figure” may also mean to gesture, as in pantomime or genuflection, or perhaps a drawing - - a visual representation - - of an event, location, person, or any other information that may be represented in this way. The expression “converse in figures” *seems* like a metaphor, because we

extend the semantic field of one term - - “converse” - - to another - - “figures” - - where it seemingly has no literal application, the “transference of an alien name” by Aristotle’s accounting.

However, it may be that an expression can be literal and metaphoric at the same time.

Emerson begins this passage asserting the connection between “visible things” and “human thoughts.” I. A. Richards writes that the traditional theory of metaphor

noticed only a few of the modes of metaphor; and limited its application of the term *metaphor* to a few of them only. And thereby it made metaphor seem to be a verbal matter, a shifting and displacement of words, whereas fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of *thoughts* *Thought* is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom.³⁸

In this consideration, Emerson’s “converse in figures” seems like a literal *and* a metaphoric statement. Though Richards, in this case, has reduced metaphor to the action of comparison, the idea that thought, not language, is exchanged explains a literal reading if we consider Emerson’s savages to be exchanging thoughts and not words. This seems a reasonable assumption, since Emerson has gone “back in history,” and the savages “have only what is necessary”; the implication is that necessity does not include language construction. But if we read the passage as an exegesis on language, which Emerson has proposed, then it may be said that the exchange *is* linguistic in nature, and when Emerson claims that, in its infancy, language is all poetry, he is still talking about a kind of language and not gestures. The context of the passage does not clarify this point. Thus, the expression may be considered metaphorical, in that to “converse in figures” is to exchange information in a plastic, or picturesque, way that may exclude verbal language. It is possible here, then, to consider the expression as both metaphor and literal without affecting the claim Emerson is making (that language was initially picturesque), and answer a discrepancy regarding metaphor as merely a trick of language, a kind of word-play, and the idea of metaphor

as being fundamental to ordinary, everyday speech and thought patterns. Indeed, a few pages later, Emerson will write, “The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind.”³⁹ The idea of ‘conversing in figures’ will reappear later, at the end of the nineteenth century, with the invention of motion pictures.

For Emerson, the separation of language and things that has occurred over time is a moral issue; he writes, “We are as much strangers in nature, as we are aliens from God.”⁴⁰ The goal of the poet, and of all humanity, is to reestablish this connection. We all, according to Emerson, possess this potentiality:

[The] relation between mind and matter is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God, and so is free to be known by all men. It appears to men, or it does not appear. When in fortunate hours we ponder this miracle, the wise man doubts, if, at all other times, he is not blind and deaf;

- - “Can these things be,
And overcome us like a summer’s cloud,
Without our special wonder?”

for the universe becomes transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own, shines through it.⁴¹

Reestablishment of the inherent connection of language to things will, accordingly, render the universe “transparent” so that we may have “only what is necessary,” and “become part or particle of God.” Emerson’s goal, then, is the restoration of the *moral* values *truth* and *beauty* to their common ground: “The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both.”⁴² This problem is resolved only by “the redemption of the soul,”⁴³ or we are blind to moral truth. Emerson states the problem thus:

The ruin or blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque [sic]. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is,

because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit.⁴⁴

Emerson posits two separate axes here, one of vision and one of things. Once they coincide, at the point of intersection, the axis of things will be superceded by the axis of vision; that is, vision will 'see' through the now "transparent" material world and perceive truth, or the will of God. Thus Emerson, in this allegory, plots the axes on lines of progression through history (from the time when language, "in its infancy . . . is all poetry"), more on a diverging course than a converging course. But the key component of this allegorical geometry is *vision*. Again, it is vision that will render the universe transparent and reveal the "higher laws" accessible to "all men." So, in the chapter "Prospects," in which this passage appears, Emerson's hope lies with the performance of the eye.

When we have achieved this unity, Emerson writes, "So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes."⁴⁵ It is with these eyes of wisdom, the eyes of a "faithful thinker," who, "resolute to detach every object from personal relations, and see it in the light of thought, shall, at the same time, kindle science with the fire of the holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into the creation."⁴⁶ In the final chapter of *Nature*, "Prospects," Emerson grounds hope and faith in the eye, in terms of both sight and perception. Emerson closes the book with, for him, a perfectly chosen simile: "The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation, - - a dominion such as now is beyond his dream of God, - - he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight."⁴⁷ The choice of trope, placement, and image here is significant. Simile differs from metaphor in that a simile closes down semantic transference, whereas metaphor opens the exchange of semantic fields. In this instance, the idea

of man entering into a perfect union with God, as compared with the elation of a blind man restored to sight, no exchange of semantic fields is necessary, or even plausible, to evoke Emerson's meaning. But, as simile, the possibility of semantic exchange is cut off, so that the two expressions are more or less equivalent. And, significantly, this simile has personal reverberation for Emerson himself, who knew personally the "wonder . . . the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight." This unique perspective allows Emerson to utilize visual metaphors in imaginative ways, and his essays to follow will expand his circle of visually significant semantic transferences.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*. Ed. and tr. S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1922), 87.
2. I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 134.
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson Volume I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 22.
4. This motto, but not the poem that follows in this discussion, was included in the original publication of *Nature* in 1836.
5. I have not been able to identify the source of this translation. However, as Emerson himself admitted to very little skill in Greek, he almost certainly picked it up from an English translation. If he had several versions of the statement from which to choose, this choice holds particular significance for its wording.
6. Carl R. Hausman, *Metaphor and Art: Interactionism and Reference in the Verbal and Nonverbal Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 20.
7. Quoted in Richards, 93.
8. Richards, 95.
9. Though the quotation from Plotinus appeared as a motto on the 1836 edition of *Nature*, it was dropped in favor of the six line poem, added during Emerson's substantial revision of the text in 1846. The six line poem did not appear as a part of *Nature* until that time. However, since it is the purpose of this study to determine Emerson's aesthetic values based on his surviving texts, I have chosen to include both the Plotinus quotation as well as the six line poem, as they appear in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Albert R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971). Robert Spiller's excellent notes clarify the condition of the copy-text and subsequent revisions under Emerson's direct supervision.
10. Aristotle, 93.
11. Emerson, 7.
12. Emerson, 7.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid, 9.
15. Ibid, 10.

16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Hausman, 59.
19. Ibid.
20. Hausman, 72.
21. Vivian C. Hopkins, *Spires of Form: A Study of Emerson's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 36.
22. Hausman, 54-55.
23. Ibid., 27.
24. Max Black, "More about Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought*. Ed. Andrew Ortony (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 28.
25. Ibid., 28.
26. Ibid., 12.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 16-17.
29. Sampson Reed, Letter to Theophilus Parsons, 31 May 1823, in Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist vol II* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1945), 211-12.
30. Emerson, 12.
31. Aristotle, 77-79.
32. Aristotle, *On Poetry and Style*. Ed. and tr. G. M. A. Grube (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1958), 90.
33. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 87.
34. Emerson, 13.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 17.
37. Ibid., 19-20.

38. Richards, 94.

39. Emerson, 21.

40. Ibid., 39.

41. Ibid., 22.

42. Ibid., 34.

43. Ibid., 43.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 44.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 45.

Chapter 4

Dilating the Circumference of the Invisible World

Contemporary reviews of *Nature* demonstrate the immediate range and scope of book's affect, both positive and negative. Not surprisingly, the Unitarian community was less than enthusiastic about the work. The strongest statement opposing the text came from Frances Bowen, Professor of Natural Theology and Moral Philosophy at Harvard:

We find beautiful writing and sound philosophy in this little work; but the effect is injured by occasional vagueness of expression, and by a vein of mysticism, that pervades the writer's whole course of thought. The highest praise that can be accorded to it, is, that it is a *suggestive* book for no one can read it without tasking his faculties to the utmost, and relapsing into fits of severe meditation. But the effort of perusal is often painful, the thoughts excited are frequently bewildering, and the results to which they lead us, uncertain and obscure. The reader feels as in a disturbed dream, in which shows of surpassing beauty are around him, and he is conversant with disembodied spirits, yet all the time he is harassed by an uneasy sort of consciousness, that the whole combination of phenomena is fantastic and unreal.¹

Bowen also labels the chapter on "Language" to be unintelligible, and states that "he could not avoid being or appearing contradictory in his judgement because the volume was a contradiction in itself."² Bowen's review was included in a longer essay entitled "Transcendentalism," in which the Unitarian professor condemned Emerson and his followers. The article appeared in the January 1837 number of *The Christian Examiner and General Review* and seemed to begin what would be, for Emerson, a period of trial during which he would further secularize Swedenborgianism (an accusation levied against *Nature* as well), isolate himself from most prominent theologians of his day, and even come to a separation of belief with his mentor of sorts, Sampson Reed. If *Nature* established Emerson as an independent thinker, his addresses in 1837 and 1838 as well as his essays to follow would set him distinctly apart from at least one Christian

element, while on the other hand gaining him more influence and a greater acceptance in more widely spread circles of literary influence.

Despite Professor Bowen's condemnation of transcendentalism in general and *Nature* in particular, the book met with more kindness in reviews further removed from Concord. Samuel Osgood writes in the Unitarian paper *The Western Messenger* of Louisville, Kentucky (January, 1837):

The work is a remarkable one, and it certainly will be called remarkable by those, who consider it "mere moonshine," as well as those, who look upon it with reverence, as the effusion of a prophet-like mind. Whatever may be the thought of the merits, or of the extravagances of the book, no one, we are sure, can read it, without feeling himself more wide awake to the beauty and meaning of Creation.

We do not think, that Idealism leads to such dangerous conclusions, as are sometimes apprehended, since it implies no distrust in natural laws. The idealist, who believes matter to be only phenomenal, will conduct in exactly the same way, as the most thorough going mater[i]alist. The idealist will be just as cautious about cutting his finger, as the materialist will: for both will believe, that the pain is really felt, whatever they may think as to the finger or the knife being real or only apparent.³

Perhaps because of his physical distance from the hotbeds of Concord, Cambridge, and Boston, Osgood recognizes a subtlety in Emerson's idealism that Bowen does not recognize in the latter's overarching refutation of transcendentalism. This point was also noted by the reviewer writing in the February 1838 number of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*: "Mr. Emerson has sufficiently guarded his Idealism by rigorous and careful expression, to leave little excuse for cavilling at his words or thoughts, except, indeed, by professed materialists and atheists, to whom he gives no ground."⁴ This same critic further writes:

[W]e would call all those together who have feared that the spirit of poetry was dead, to rejoice that such a *poem* as "nature" is written. It grows upon us as we reperuse it. It proves to us, that the only true and perfect mind is the poetic. Other minds are not to be despised, indeed; they are germs of humanity; but the poet alone is the man - - meaning by

the poet, not the versifier, nor the painter of outward nature merely, but the total soul, grasping truth, and expressing it melodiously, equally to the eye and heart.

It has . . . found its readers and lovers, and those not a few; the highest intellectual culture and the simplest instinctive innocence have alike received it, and felt it to be a divine Thought, borne on a stream of 'English undefiled,' such as we had almost despaired could flow in this our world of grist and saw mills, whose utilitarian din has all but drowned out the melodies of nature.⁵

Similarly, New York's *Knickerbocker* review, in July 1837, states:

'NATURE.' - - A thin, handsome volume, thus entitled, is before us. It is the work of a calm, contemplative mind, capable of analyzing thought, and tracing the influence of outward upon inward nature; of one who feels deeply, and in whom the 'poetry of the spirit' is ever active. Some affectation there may be of the German style, 'but that's not much.' The work has pure thoughts and beautiful; and it will commend itself to the heart.⁶

European reviews were generally sympathetic, and linked Emerson to Carlyle, Swedenborg, and Coleridge more readily than did American accounts. The March 1840 issue of the *Westminster Review* of London presents, in Kenneth Cameron's words, "the most comprehensive European survey of Emerson's significance."⁷ The review states, in part:

The utterances of Mr Carlyle are in the streets and schools of experienced and studious Europe, but [Emerson's] voice has come to us over the broad Atlantic, full of the same tender complaint, the same indignant exhortation, the same trust and distrust, faith and incredulity, yet all sufficiently modified by circumstances of personality and place to show that the plant is assimilated to the climate and the soil, although the seed may have been brought from elsewhere.

Unitarianism in America seems to have its orthodoxy like any other profession, and probably Dr Channing there exercises the same kind of Popedom as Dr Chalmers occupies in Calvinistic Scotland. Although it would seem that if Unitarianism is destined to so important a mission as to be the sole ultimate antagonist of Romanism in America (a position asserted for her by many within and some without her communion), she must open an ample embrace to philosophical scepticism, and not be too critical of the especial belief of those who seek her as a great home and refuge of Christian liberty. . . . The Unitarians of Boston ought not to have parted with Mr Emerson.

The first look of such a system as Mr Emerson's has assuredly much that is attractive for assertors of the democratic principle in general, and for a people so circumstanced as

Americans in particular. The ‘vox populi vox Dei,’ assumes a very special import when the ‘vox populi’ does not merely mean an historical utterance, but an expression of the universal Spirit, which is at once the Thought of God and the Instinct of Man: the sense of the majority is no longer a sum of separate wills and passions, but an absolute and transcending power, only not supernatural because it is the most perfect development of nature.⁸

A Swedenborgian paper, *The Intellectual Repository and New Jerusalem Magazine* (London), highly praised *Nature* in its April 1840 issue, not knowing the author to be Emerson:

In the little work before us, it is plainly to be observed that the beautiful and heart-cheering doctrine of correspondences is the basis on which the writer’s peculiar views have been founded. The mode in which the subject generally is treated, is highly calculated to fill the heart with pure and lasting images. It is assuredly for all who can, to cherish a love of nature and occasionally of solitude; not indeed for the purpose of gratifying the lone enthusiasm of our spirits, by the indefinite creations of an ideal world, but to re-conquer our fading sensibilities, and to renew the freshness of virtuous emotion.⁹

An interesting insight provided by *The Intellectual Repository* critic is that Emerson’s writing is “highly calculated to fill the heart with pure and lasting images.” Certainly Emerson’s imagistic style is calculated in the sense that he locates the animating power of the doctrine of correspondences in the eye.

In a similar insight, the *Knickerbocker* critic recognizes Emerson’s “poetry of the spirit,” which will “commend itself to the heart.” Emerson’s “poetry,” in this sense, lies in his metaphoric expression and epigrammatic style. Cameron is one of many critics to have referred to *Nature* as Emerson’s “prose poem”; interestingly, the recognition of Emerson’s poetic prose style depends on his craftsmanship with language. However, this craftsmanship is finely attuned to the visual more so than the verbal aspects of language. This distinction is noted in one of the most potent antagonistic reviews of *Nature*, coming significantly from *The New Jerusalem Magazine* of Boston, New England’s principal Swedenborgian vehicle, featuring many contributions from

Sampson Reed, which Emerson always sought out and kept records of. In the *New Jerusalem* review of October 1841, John Westall writes:

That the “religious philosophy of nature” will some day be written for the New Church, we have no doubt. But it will be by some one who receives her doctrines, whose spirituality consists in something more than the mere vaporization of self, and whose theology, rejecting the Pantheism sublimated in the alembic of fancy, which now passes under the imposing name of Transcendentalism, will be derived from the Word, as the source of all truth, the pillar and ground of Faith. “Nature” was not written by a New Churchman, as a writer in the *Intellectual Repository* supposes, but is commonly understood to be the production of Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹⁰

The *New Jerusalem* reviewer makes an important point about how far Emerson had come from his early encounters with Swedenborgianism through Sampson Reed. According to Westall, the “religious philosophy of nature” for the New Church will be, and the implication is that it can *only* be, written from the firm basis of the Word, rather than the ephemerality of transcendental thought. The Word, as “the source of all truth, the pillar and ground of Faith,” represents the essence of Emerson’s distance from Reed by the time of the publication of *Nature* in 1836. Reed wrote in 1820, “The Word of God is immutable, as he is; and all apparent changes are only the motion of the human mind. . . . Human systems have brought down God to the image of man. But the word still remains unchanged”;¹¹ and later, in 1826, he added, “It is the sole object of the Bible to conjoin the soul with God.”¹² Emerson has surrendered the solidity of the Word for the possibilities of seeing through the veil of nature; he has, in a sense, brought the image of God *up* to man.

According to biographer Robert Richardson, “from the second half of September 1836 to early March 1837 Emerson was reading, thinking, writing, and talking at white heat.”¹³ Alfred Kazin has written that when Emerson was ready to publish *Nature*, his real ministry was just begun.¹⁴

Immediately following its publication, Emerson found his intellectual powers waxing. Conditions of his environment in Concord were such as to lead him, with increasing inertia, toward further developments of his thoughts and his subsequent influence. The (so called) Transcendental Club, formed by Henry Hedge “as a protest against the arid intellectual climate of Harvard and Cambridge,”¹⁵ met for the first time in September 1836, and would continue to meet thirty times over the next four years, with Emerson attending twenty of these meetings.¹⁶ His wife Lidian was in her eighth month of pregnancy in March 1837, contributing to the enthusiasm which spilled over into his journals and, “as he often did when excited, he tossed off lists and catalogs.”¹⁷ Emerson planned a series of lectures, to be called “The Philosophy of Modern History.” Richardson writes that “years of practice at recording first impressions, dreams, nuances, and unbidden objections were paying off. His journal becomes remarkably alive now - - even transparent.”¹⁸ Richardson’s choice of terms seems perfectly in tune with the man who prized intuiting truth behind the veil of nature; Emerson seems fully integrated into his own philosophy, in thought as well as the language he chose to represent his ideas.

On October 15, 1836, Emerson took a walk out to Goose Pond, near Walden Pond. His journal entry for the day reads that “this brilliant & warm day led me out this morn. into the woods & to Goose Pond. Amid the many coloured trees I thought what principles I might lay down as the foundation of this Course of Lectures I shall read to my fellow citizens[.]”¹⁹

1. There is a relation between man & nature so that whatever is in matter is in mind.
2. It is a necessity of human nature that it should express itself outwardly & embody its thought. As all creatures are allured to reproduce themselves, so must the thought be imparted in Speech. The more profound the thought, the more burdensome. What is in will out. Action is as great a pleasure & cannot be foreborne[.]

3. It is the constant endeavor of the mind to idealize the actual, to accomodate [sic] the shows of things to the desires of the mind. Hence architecture & all art.
4. It is the constant tendency of the mind to Unify all it beholds, or to reduce the remotest facts to a single law. Hence all endeavors at classification.
5. There is a / parallel tendency / corresponding Unity / in nature which makes this just, as in the composition of the compound shell or leaf or animal from a few elements.
6. There is a tendency in the mind to separate particulars & in magnifying them to lose sight of the connexion of the object with the Whole. Hence, all false views, Sects;
7. Underneath all Appearances & causing all appearances are certain eternal Laws which we call the Nature of Things.
8. There is one Mind common to all men.²⁰

These eight “Goose Pond” principles are the basis of ideas which will be worked out in the essays shortly to come. All of these principles have aesthetic application which will resonate in his next two significant lectures, popularly known as *The American Scholar* and *The Divinity School Address*, will directly influence the young Henry Thoreau (among others), and will, in different aspects, resonate through the bulk of American thinking and writing in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries.

On June 22, 1837, Harvard Professor Cornelius C. Felton wrote to Emerson asking him to deliver the Phi Beta Kappa Society’s annual address, an invitation which Emerson eagerly accepted. Emerson had not been the Society’s first choice. The first choice had been the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew Wainwright, an Episcopalian and author of a book of hymns, who declined the offer.²¹ Robert Spiller notes that “this was the challenge Emerson had instinctively sought, but the ideas swirling in his mind were probably not those expected by the Harvard sages.”²² Though Emerson’s enthusiasm represented, as Emily Dickinson might have described it,

“the soul at white heat,” he was aware of the low state of society following the Panic of 1837 as well as feeling distress over the controversy surrounding, and the closing of, Bronson Alcott’s experimental school in Boston. By the summer of 1837, Emerson was “ready to announce to a larger audience his doctrine of education through nature and action rather than merely through books.”²³ This statement presages Emerson’s continuing movement away from language and more toward direct experience, which for Emerson lies in visual comprehension. Emerson’s journal entry for July 29 reads: “If the Allwise would give me light, I should write for the Cambridge men a theory of the Scholar’s office. It is not all books which it behooves him to know[,] least of all to be a bookworshipper[,] but he must be able to read in all books that alone which gives value to books - - in all to read one[,] the one incorruptible text of truth.”²⁴ Nature is the “text of truth,” a text not of words but of images and intuition, the “poetry of the spirit.” Though Emerson does not commit much space in his journal to the upcoming Phi Beta Kappa address, he records his intentions in no uncertain terms on August 18:

The hope to arouse young men at Cambridge to a worthier view of their literary duties prompts me to offer the theory of the Scholar’s function. He has an office to perform in society. What is it? To arouse the intellect; to keep it erect & sound; to keep admiration in the hearts of the people; to keep the eye open upon its spiritual aims. How shall he render this service? By being a Soul among those things with which he deals.

One thing is plain he must have a training by himself - - the training of another age will not fit him. He himself & not others must judge what is good for him. Now the young are oppressed by their instructors. Bacon or Locke saw and thought, & inspired by their thinking a generation & now all must be pinned to their thinking which a year after was already too narrow for them. . . . Meek young men grow up in colleges & believe it is their duty to accept the views which books have given & grow up slaves. Some good angel in the shape of a turnkey bids them demand a habeas corpus and the moment they come out of durance the heaven opens & the earth smiles.

The human mind thinks and records its thought. The sacredness of the act is instantly transferred to the record and they think to pin down the Soul in eternising the thought. This is obvious in Church, in State, in Schools, in Arts, in Books, in Marriage.²⁵

The crowd gathering to hear Emerson's address on August 31 included U.S. Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, Massachusetts Supreme Court Justice Lemuel Shaw (soon to become Herman Melville's father-in-law), Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Richard Henry Dana, Wendell Phillips, Edward Everett, former mentor Edward Channing, Henry Ware, Sr.,²⁶ and the "already brooding" Andrews Norton.²⁷ Henry Thoreau, who had graduated the day before, had already left Cambridge. According to Spiller, Emerson addressed a full house; "the windows and aisles were crowded by young and old sympathizers and skeptics."²⁸ Emerson was prepared, as he had done with *Nature*, to storm the battlements, this time regarding the responsibilities of the American Scholar's office. He makes his intention known early in the address:

Perhaps the time is already come . . . when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. . . . Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age as the star in the constellation Harp which now flames in our zenith, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years?²⁹

Indeed this is a statement of independence, but as Richardson notes, Emerson was in a "rebellious, challenging mood" when he composed the address that, fifty years later, Oliver Wendell Holmes would declare "our Intellectual Declaration of Independence."³⁰ Also, Richardson suggests that Emerson, "interested not in the bookworm, not even in the thinker, only in Man Thinking," was "not liberating American literature or the American intelligentsia," but was emancipating the American individual, "the single person," as well as himself, from his own

“incapacitating” European education.³¹ Thus, the address is a personal profession of faith in the American capacity for *actions* over *words*.³² He states the problem in this contradiction: “We are lined with eyes. We see with our feet. The time is infected with Hamlet’s unhappiness, - - ‘Sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.’”³³

As he greets his audience on the “re-commencement of our literary year,” he declares, “Our anniversary is one of hope, and, perhaps, not enough of labor.”³⁴ Emerson’s “hope” here is perhaps a synonym for faith (following Richardson’s reading), but it is a faith dependant upon action, and this action is that of the unification of the divided man into “One Man,” his proper office that of “Man Thinking”: “The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, –a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.”³⁵ He continues:

Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is a Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship.³⁶

This passage corresponds most directly to point six of the “Goose Pond” principles; also, Emerson’s point is underscored formally by his use of synecdoche. The Scholar is the focus of this treatment: “In the right state, he is, *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking.”³⁷ The address expands on the Goose Pond principles, which stand throughout Emerson’s essays, as much as anything can be said to, as a unified system of fundamental guidelines.

The American Scholar echoes *Nature*, however, in its definition of the scholar's office as a correspondent to nature. Emerson wants to "see him in his school, and consider him in reference to the main influence he receives":

The first in time and the first in importance upon the mind is that of nature. . . . What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending he can never find - - so entire, so boundless. Far, too, as her splendors shine, system on system shooting like rays, upward, downward, without centre, without circumference, - - in the mass and in the particular nature hastens to render account of herself to the mind.³⁸

Emerson is nothing if not complete in his conception of omnipresent nature. The scholar is, like the all of material existence, enveloped in every direction, in every dimension, by "this web of God," which is always "returning into itself." Rationally, an existence "without centre, without circumference" cannot exist materially, but is the state of existence itself. "Without center, without circumference" does not describe a circle (for there is no boundary to determine a specific *form*), but a circle in constant motion is *implied* by Emerson's word choice. The implied circle acts in a metaphoric fashion to describe the eternal condition of existence made possible by the fact of its "return *into* itself," or eternal re-creation of itself moment by moment. And, as Emerson determines in point four of the Goose Pond principles, there exists the human necessity for classification:

To the young mind, every thing is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things, and see them in one nature; then three, then three thousand; and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running under ground, whereby contrary and remote things cohere, and flower out from one stem. It presently learns, that, since the dawn of history, there has been a constant accumulation and classifying of facts. But what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind?³⁹

This perception of the interconnectedness of all of nature, and of itself with the mind, and all as the “inexplicable web of God,” is the role of the scholar; this new breed of American intellect must be “the ambitious soul” that “sits down before each refractory fact; one after the other, reduces all strange constitutions, all new powers, to their class and their law, and goes on forever to animate the last fibre of organization, the outskirts of nature, by insight.”⁴⁰ In short, the scholar philosophizes to the ends of nature, only to find himself returning *into* the model of his own mind.

As Emerson had already made clear in *Nature*,

by a few strokes [the poet] delineates, as on air, the sun, the mountain, the camp, the city, the hero, the maiden, not different from what we know them, but only lifted from the ground and afloat before the eye. He unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew. Possessed himself by a heroic passion, he uses matter as symbols of it. The sensual man conforms thoughts to things; the poet conforms things to his thoughts. The one esteems nature as rooted and fast; the other, as fluid and impresses his being thereon. To him, the refractory world is ductile and flexible; he invests and stones with humanity, and makes them the words of the Reason.⁴¹

Thus the poet, the American Scholar, utilizes nature as his material, but refractory facts become fluid; his mind is, just as the stones he invests with humanity, a part of nature, and this quality of fluidity is expressed by Emerson as “fixed as words of Reason” - - but only at a fixed point on a continuum that is ever changing. In *Nature*, Emerson defines “nature” as all that is “not me”; also, in *The American Scholar*, he states, “The world, - - this shadow of the soul, or *other me*, lies wide around.”⁴² These definitions of nature suggest the question: *is the mind a part of nature?* In *The American Scholar*, Emerson answers in the affirmative: the law of nature is also the law of the human mind. He writes, “[The scholar] shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, the other is print.”⁴³ The mind is perhaps also thought of as a *conduit*, a medium through which nature is realized and then expressed through

language. Emerson prefaces the following remarks with the statement, “The theory of books is noble.”⁴⁴

The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him—life; it went out from him—truth. It came to him—short - lived actions; it went out from him—immortal thoughts. It came to him—business; it went out from him—poetry. It was—dead fact; now it is quick thought. It can stand, and it can go on. It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires. Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing.⁴⁵

When Emerson calls the theory of books noble, his emphasis is of course on the term *theory*. The idea of recording experience is noble as opposed to accurate, or ideal. Emerson is not interested in theory, but (again) in Man Thinking. Thus is the office of the scholar “transmuting life into truth;”⁴⁶ he insists “life is our dictionary.”⁴⁷ Emerson makes his audience aware of the danger of books misused, particularly books of the past from which he is trying to break:

The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, - - the act of thought, - - is instantly transferred to the record. The poet chanting, was felt to be a divine man. Henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit. Henceforth it is settled, the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly, the book becomes noxious. The guide is a tyrant.⁴⁸

Worship of a statue does not equate with the worship of a god; perhaps a bit of Emerson’s hardened Unitarianism is still in place here, as the metaphor recalls the “Popish behavior” from which the Puritans recoiled. Emerson continues:

Books are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings. But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must, - - when the soul seeth not, when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining, - - we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is. We hear that we may speak. The Arabian proverb says, “A fig tree looking on a fig tree, becometh fruitful.”⁴⁹

Emerson does not wish to discredit thoroughly the printed word: "We all know, that as the human body can be nourished on any food, though it were boiled grass and the broth of shoes, so the human mind can be fed by any knowledge. And great and heroic men have existed, who had almost no other information than by the printed page. I would only say, that it needs a strong head to bear that diet."⁵⁰ "Creative reading," for Emerson, makes a book "luminous with manifold allusion" wherein "every sentence is doubly significant."⁵¹ The scholar's idle times, presumably, are those in which he is *not* a "transparent eye-ball . . . a part or particle of God," which seems to be the condition of mind of the scholar in question. Emerson writes voluminously of the omnipresence of nature, yet here he does acknowledge the "intervals of darkness" which are inevitable. Though Emerson offers his point through analogy, the term *darkness* suggests that nature that cannot be *seen* cannot be *realized*; again, sight figures prominently into the experience of nature. And, though the Arabian proverb provides for "a fig tree *looking* on a fig tree," Emerson might equate the term *looking* in the proverb with a kind of influence by contagion, since sight is the locus for Emerson's construction of nature, or the universe, (seal) and the mind (print); Emerson declares of the scholar that "he is the world's eye."⁵²

Near the end of the address, Emerson offers a consideration of one of his own principal influences:

There is one man of genius who has done much for this philosophy of life, whose literary value has never yet been rightly estimated; - - I mean Emanuel Swedenborg. The most imaginative of men, yet writing with the precision of a mathematician, he endeavored to engraft a purely philosophical Ethics on the popular Christianity of his time. Such an attempt, of course, must have difficulty which no genius could surmount. But he saw and showed the connexion between nature and the affections of the soul. He pierced the emblematic or spiritual character of the visible, audible, tangible world. Especially did his shade-loving muse hover over and interpret the lower parts of nature; he showed the

mysterious bond that allies moral evil to the foul material forms, and has given in epic parables a theory of insanity, of beasts, of unclean and fearful things.⁵³

Emerson knew well the difficulty of Swedenborg's attempt, as he was attempting a similar construction of moral philosophy. Yet while he offers his praise of Swedenborg, it is important to keep in mind that Emerson's knowledge of Swedenborg came primarily through Sampson Reed, and when Emerson did encounter Swedenborg on his own, he did so only in English translation.

Clarence Hotson emphasizes the significance of this fact:

Emerson got his Swedenborg through Sampson Reed, but made a thoroughly individual use of the material. . . . Inasmuch as Swedenborg definitely says what each symbol he uses signifies in his meaning and intentions . . . it clearly follows that no one, not even Emerson, has the right to read any meaning into Swedenborg's text other than that which arises from the practice of applying to each of the master's symbols the idea which he himself attached to it, as the series and the context make necessary.⁵⁴

By the time he was composing *Nature*, had not yet read Swedenborg on his own. Hotson further writes:

Had [Emerson] . . . subjected Swedenborg's writings to a thorough linguistic study in order to inquire of the original Latin whether that teacher used terms in their usual sense, or whether, on the contrary, he used them in a special, pregnant, Swedenborgian sense, Emerson might have a distinguished contribution to the study of a fascinating and somewhat baffling author. But his subsequent lecture "Swedenborg," as published in *Representative Men*, shows quite plainly that Emerson did nothing of the kind.⁵⁵

Swedenborgian scholar E. Bruce Glenn also notes that Emerson's gleanings from Swedenborg were particularly single-minded:

Partially [Emerson] found his faith in the Hindu scriptures; partially in the idealistic writings of the German philosophers; and partially in the works of Swedenborg. He took from each what he thought he needed, proclaiming his American independence from any of them; and in this lay his unhappy confusion regarding Swedenborg.

That his approach to Swedenborg's teachings was a confused one can be readily seen from reference in his journals and letters, and from the evidence, sometimes mute, of his annotations in the copies of Swedenborg's work that are preserved in his study at Concord.

The full story can perhaps never be pieced together; but what emerges from these sources is of interest to the New Church man. For it shows how a mind great in the potentialities of spiritual insight can be rendered partly blind by the faith in its independent vision of truth.⁵⁶

Thus Emerson's readings from Swedenborg were at times misinterpreted and, to be sure, selective. This evidence only highlights Emerson's literary relationship with Sampson Reed, though this relationship, which grew to a personal friendship, would cool over the issue of Emerson's perceived "misuse" of Swedenborg. Emerson's journal shows an entry made between June 16 and July 12, 1842, that defines the split:

In town I also talked with Sampson Reed, of Swedenborg, & the rest. "It is not so in your experience, but it is so in the other world." - - "Other world?" I reply, "there is no other world; here or nowhere is the whole fact; all the universe over, there is but one thing - - this old double, Creator - creature, mind - matter, right - wrong." He would have devils, objective devils. I replied, That pure malignity exists, is an absurd position. Goodness & Being are one. Your proposition is not to be entertained by a rational agent: it is atheism; it is the last profanation. In regard to Swedenborg, I commend him as a grand poet. Reed wished that if I admired the poetry, I should feel it as a fact. I told him, All my concern is with the subjective truth of Jesus's or Swedenborg's or Homer's remark, not at all with the object. To care too much for the object were low & gossiping. He may & must speak to his circumstance and the way of events & of belief around him; he may speak of angels or jews or gods or Lutherans or gypsies, or whatsoever figures come next to his hand; I can readily enough translate his rhetoric into mine.⁵⁷

That which Emerson read as parable, Reed read as fact, and Reed believed Swedenborg intended his work to be read as such.⁵⁸ If Swedenborg had written in parables, Emerson might easily enough, as he writes, "translate his rhetoric into mine," meaning that he might take message, if not the actual language, from the text. Again, Emerson read Swedenborg in two ways: from Sampson Reed's accounts of his revelations, and (later) in English translation. In any event, that Emerson was utilizing Swedenborg for his own rhetorical purposes is without question. Emerson is interested in *subjective truth*, the object of its transmission being only a vehicle for the mind.

Bruce Glenn's accusation of Emerson being partly blinded by his faith in his independent vision of truth is itself misleading; while, again, Emerson indeed did not have Reed's grasp of Swedenborg, his purpose in reading Swedenborg, his "creative reading," was different, as Emerson was interested in the mind more so than the world.

The immediate popularity of the Phi Beta Kappa address is attested to by its publishing history:

[The oration] appeared in pamphlet form as *An Oration Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837*; an edition of 500 copies was issued on September 23, 1837, under the imprint of James Munroe and Company and printed by James Loring. . . . The edition sold out within the month, as Emerson notes in his journal on October 24. The favorable response led him to arrange for a second edition of the pamphlet, the only one of his early works to be so honored. . . . The new edition of 515 copies appeared on February 23 with a new printer - - Folsom, Thurston, and Wells of Cambridge The second edition failed to sell out with the rapidity of the first. Out of the printing of 515 copies, 190 were still on Munroe's books as "on hand" in January 1844.⁵⁹

Perhaps the most intriguing review of the pamphlet for Emerson appeared in the *New Jerusalem Magazine* in October 1837. The review was written, but not signed, by Sampson Reed. Reed considers Mr. Emerson a "writer of very considerable power, and . . . favorably known as a popular lecturer on various subjects," and further notes that "we cannot at present pretend to enter into any analysis of his mind and character, even as exhibited in this oration."⁶⁰ Because Emerson at the time was "as yet published but little; at least under his own name,"⁶¹ which of course discounts the anonymously penned *Nature*, Reed confines himself to an offering of extracts from the pamphlet and a few cursory comments. However, Reed makes his critical stance in regard to Emerson's treatment of Swedenborg. He writes:

It is most true, that Swedenborg's "literary value has never yet been rightly estimated;" and indeed it may well be doubted whether it ever will be, by those who look upon him, merely

as a literary man. They may extol his imagination, and his precision and accuracy. But those can have but a poor idea, even of his literary character, who have not studied his writings too well to speak of his having attempted to engraft any thing “on the popular Christianity of his time.” We have no doubt but Mr. Emerson intended to speak respectfully and truly of Swedenborg. But his remarks show that he has read him little; - - or rather, to little purpose.⁶²

Reed’s commentary signals the split between himself and Emerson, postulated not so much on Swedenborg’s status of visionary or literary man, but on Emerson’s misreading and misunderstanding of Swedenborg’s purpose. Though Reed does conclude his remarks by noting his hopefulness to consider Emerson’s work further because “it derives some importance from the fact, that many seem to suppose, that Mr. Emerson’s general views are nearly allied to those of the New Church,”⁶³ the qualifying terms of his statement suggest that Reed was aware that Emerson was taking what he needed for his purpose and was, as Glenn had accused, partly blinded to the rest. The argument between Reed and Emerson over whether Swedenborg was visionary who wrote fact, or was “merely a literary man,” was never reconciled, and it was not Emerson’s intention to seek reconciliation. Though he and Reed were in some ways allied spiritually and had become friends, Emerson had what he required professionally from Reed, which distanced him from his former mentor. Reed’s influence on Emerson is not to be underestimated. Clarence Hotson’s research demonstrates that

Sampson Reed influenced Emerson for forty-five years, during which time Emerson mentioned *Growth of the Mind* in terms of high praise seven times. . . . Two gift copies, an autographed copy of a late edition, and a quotation and allusion in one of his latest public lectures testify to his enduring regard for Reed’s book. . . . Eighteen passages in the published *Journal*, works, and correspondence of Ralph Waldo Emerson show the effect of his readings of Sampson Reed’s papers in the *New Jerusalem Magazine*. Four passages show Reed’s general influence on Emerson. Six *Journal* entries, by quotation and by direct reference, testify to his admiration of Reed’s oration, “Genius.” Eight passages have general comment, nearly always highly favorable, on Reed as a religious thinker and talker. Emerson recorded four conversations with Reed In all, there are fifty-one references.⁶⁴

Emerson had outgrown, at least professionally, his dependence on Reed. This marks the first of Emerson's major breaks from his former attachments and a step forward toward his own literary independence. The next break would come one year later, with another address to the Harvard Divinity School.

Emerson had been invited by a committee of seniors to address the Harvard Divinity School graduating class on July 15, 1838. The invitation came from the seniors alone; the faculty was not involved, and the ceremony did not have the formality of the Phi Beta Kappa oration the year before. The informality of the occasion, along with Emerson's confidence gained by the success of the Phi Beta Kappa address, led him "to conclude that the time was ripe for a frontal attack on what he considered the weaknesses of the Unitarianism then taught at the presumably nonsectarian Harvard Divinity School and practiced in the churches."⁶⁵ Despite the informality of the occasion, in attendance were Professors Henry Ware Jr., Henry Ware Sr., retired Professor Andrews Norton (whom Emerson would later refer to as the 'Unitarian Pope'), as well as Elizabeth Peabody, Theodore Parker, and a small group of scholars already committed to "a contrary doctrine and involved in defensive academic controversy."⁶⁶

This address, shorter and more compact than *The American Scholar*, allowed Emerson to address the failings of both the Unitarian church and the school that was responsible for supplying its ministers, and he could do so without fear of condemnation from the church. Emerson had resigned officially from Boston's Second Church in 1832, but continued to preach occasionally, though his preaching tapered off and came to an abrupt end in January 1839.⁶⁷ In this address Emerson emphasizes the primacy of intuition over classical study, and here as well he equates intuition with *sight*, again setting the locus for truth in the eye; this equation remains consistent

throughout Emerson's work. The man who cannot see clearly and must rely on the report of another man's vision is the root of the spiritual crisis Emerson perceived. Here, as well, Emerson denigrates the written word, though his distinction regarding the *relative* value of the word is more equivocal than in *Nature*. This equivocation will help tie *The American Scholar* and *Nature* together and, along with *The Divinity School Address*, forms a sustained break from the formalism Emerson found confining.

The invitation to give the address came at a time when the state of the clergy was on Emerson's mind. His journal entry for March 18, 1838, states:

There is no better subject for effective writing than the Clergy. I ought to sit & think & then write a discourse to the American clergy showing them the ugliness & unprofitableness of theology & churches at this day & the glory & sweetness of the Moral Nature out of whose pale they are almost wholly shut.⁶⁸

The episode recorded so forcefully in *The Divinity School Address*, the comparison between the real snowstorm and the "merely spectral" preacher, also occurred on this day, and was recorded in Emerson's journal; the passage finds its way into the address almost verbatim, but in the context of the address the episode seems both actual and apocryphal, in that it speaks to the "universal mind," a rhetorical quality Emerson highly praised and sought.

Early in *The Divinity School Address*, Emerson brings forward sight as metaphor for spiritual perception:

Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily.⁶⁹

Eyes prepared for “the crimson dawn,” the reawakening of the day, make plain the “mystery of nature” or, more accurately, make perception of the spiritual quality of nature evident. Even the night, normally associated with ignorance or close-mindedness, is here described by the seemingly paradoxical term “transparent darkness.” This darkness allows the “almost spiritual rays” of the stars to pass through, rather than be hidden or obfuscated. This is the “blithe air” and “infinite space” Emerson writes of in *Nature*; since he is addressing an audience of newly minted ministers, no doubt aware of Emerson’s views, this phrase has perhaps more emphasis than would at first appear. Man, as described here, “seems a young child” and his world “a toy”; he is aware of the “mystery of nature,” because “the mystery of nature was never displayed [*to him*] more happily.” This further implies that nature is “happily” displayed because the man here is capable of perceiving its “mystery.” This is, of course, an ideal situation of which Emerson speaks. He begins his essay with this image: the eye of man prepared, again, to experience the spiritual mystery of nature without impediment.

However, the attitude of the religious atmosphere Emerson perceives is expressed in contradiction to this ideal condition: “But the moment the mind opens, and reveals the laws which transverse the universe, and make things what they are, then shrinks the great world at once into a mere illustration and fable of this mind.”⁷⁰ The *mind*, the logical faculty, is open, but the *eye* is, apparently, closed: “Behold these outrunning laws, which our imperfect apprehension can see tend this way and that, but not come full circle.”⁷¹ To come full circle is to come back to the *self*, the individual’s own experience; Emerson reiterates this idea in writing, “The man who renounces himself, comes to himself by doing so,”⁷² and, later, “That is always best which gives me to myself.”⁷³

Emerson writes, “The sentiment of virtue is a reverence and a delight in the presence of certain divine laws. These laws refuse to be adequately stated. They will not by us or for us be written out on paper, or spoken by the tongue.”⁷⁴ He thus denigrates the word for its lack of ability to, as he states later, “communicate religion.”⁷⁵ Instead, he writes,

Yet as this sentiment is the essence of all religion, let me guide your eye to the precise objects of the sentiment, by an enumeration of some of those classes of facts in which this element is conspicuous.

The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance.⁷⁶

Again, Emerson sublimates the word to intuition, the laws of the soul, which create themselves in a metaphysical condition, thus escaping reason; he later writes, “Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms.”⁷⁷ These laws, indeed, are not “subject” to any rationale. The term “law” in this usage is not a conditional statement, nor a code of ethical or moral behavior. Neither is this law formal; rather, it is inherent and flexible, and Emerson’s descriptions suggest, again, the image of a circle “without center, without circumference”:

The perception of this law of laws always awakens in the mind a sentiment which we call the religious sentiment, and which makes our highest happiness. . . . By it, is the universe made safe and habitable, not by science or power. Thought may work cold and intransitive in things, and find no end or unity. But the dawn of the sentiment of virtue on the heart, gives and is the assurance that Law is sovereign over all natures; and the worlds, time, space, eternity, do seem to break out in joy.⁷⁸

When Emerson guides our eye to the “religious sentiment,” he ultimately guides us back to ourselves - - to the inherent “law of laws” - - and thus do we come “full circle,” not by the word, but by *surrendering* the word. Emerson makes this the key point of his address:

whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely; It is an intuition. It

cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing.⁷⁹

Emerson's example of this, primarily, is Jesus, "whose name is not so much written as ploughed into the history of this world. . . . Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man."⁸⁰ The very name of Christ is denigrated by the word used to express the philosophy that name connotes; it is not written, but "ploughed into the history of the world," and is thus an inseparable aspect of nature. Emerson's terms begin to coalesce here: Christ saw "with open eye the mystery of the soul," which may be equated with the "mystery of nature" previously determined. The "open eye" is essential to this philosophy; when the word replaces intuition, "life is comic or pitiful, as soon as the high ends of being fade out of sight, and man becomes near-sighted, and can only attend to what addresses the senses."⁸¹ Emerson uses the past tense verbs "saw, " "lived," "had," to declare that Christ was human and existed in time, as well as to imply a seeming contradiction - - the eternal quality of Christ's teaching - - to the purpose of exposing the failure of logic to embrace the intuition he expresses. Thus he utilizes the contradictory expressions "severe harmony" and "ravished by its beauty," just as he had used "transparent darkness" before. For this address, the expression is Emerson's syntactical equivalent of the "transparent eye-ball"; he uses the contradictory purpose here for the same effect. But while Emerson makes us aware of Christ's place as a "true prophet," he warns of the danger that has become of his *language*:

The idioms of his language, and the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on principles, but on his tropes. Christianity became a Mythos, as the poetic teaching of Greece and Egypt, before. He spoke of miracles; for he

felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the man is diviner. But the very word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.⁸²

Again Emerson emphasizes that the word is not sufficient, and is in fact detrimental as was currently being taught by the high criticism, the biblical formalism, of the Harvard Divinity

School:

Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is worship defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us. We are fain to wrap our cloaks about us, and secure, as best we can, a solitude that hears not. I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more.⁸³

Ritual has replaced sentiment, and the word has been dried of its meaning. Emerson offers a striking visual scene to emphasize his point, again with nature in the foreground against a pale imitation of spiritualism:

A snowstorm was falling around us. The snowstorm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived or acted, we were none the wiser for it. . . . This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought and sold . . . yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all.⁸⁴

Emerson creates a visual scene from the point of view of the spectator in the congregation; the eye is trained on the preacher, and then *shifts focus* to the snowstorm through the window beyond. The eye *itself* (for Emerson grants the eye this agency) feels "the sad contrast"; just as Jesus' name is "ploughed into the history of the world," so has this preacher certainly ploughed the actual earth, but the fact of his experience is lost on the viewer. The "spectral" minister has not presented the experience of ploughing either in fact or in his mission of revealing Christ in the world, "communicating religion," offering a pale image rather than living, intuitive experience.

This example expresses Emerson's chief complaint against the church: "The soul is not preached,"⁸⁵ and, "The remedy to their [ministers] deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul."⁸⁶ Thus Emerson issues his call to arms:

It is time that this ill-suppressed murmur of all thoughtful men against the famine of our churches; this moaning of the heart because it is bereaved of the consolation, the hope, the grandeur, that come alone out of the culture of the moral nature; should be heard through the sleep of indolence, and over the din of routine. This great and perpetual office of the preacher is not discharged. Preaching is the expression of the moral sentiment in application to the duties of life. In how many churches, by how many prophets, tell me, is man made sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing into his mind; and that he is drinking forever the soul of God?⁸⁷

He offers, as well, his solution to the problem:

The remedy is already declared in the ground of our complaint of the Church. We have contrasted the Church with the Soul. In the soul, then, let the redemption be sought. In one soul, in your soul, there are resources for the world. . . . It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that he speaketh, not spake.⁸⁸

Christ *was* human, and Emerson writes of his life in the past tense. God is eternal, the present-tense soul, and as Emerson makes clear, he "speaketh, not spake." Only through a clear and all seeing eye can we realize the presence of the divine in the world. Emerson's advice to the class of graduating theologians is to be a man, to "look to it first and only, that you are such; that fashion, custom, authority, pleasure, and money are nothing to you, - - are not bandages over your eyes, that you cannot see, - - but live with the privilege of immeasurable mind."⁸⁹ This plea requires, again, a rebirth of vision - - that is, granting sight the agency to activate the spiritual intuition so the minister may be able to communicate it: "Let it stand forevermore, a temple, which new love, new faith, new sight shall restore to more than its first splendor to mankind."⁹⁰

The address ends, appropriately, with Emerson's affirmation of the necessity of vision, placing again intuition and spiritual truth in the activity of the eye:

I look for the new Teacher, that shall follow so far those shining laws, that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, the Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy.⁹¹

Emerson repeats the word “see” so often that its emphasis as a key component of his thinking is impossible to underestimate. Also this final paragraph ties together the challenge to his audience, to see the “shining laws . . . come full circle,” and “see the world to be the mirror of the soul.”

Again Emerson emphasizes the correspondence between mind and nature originally set out in *Nature* and furthered in *The American Scholar*, that “one is seal, the other print.” The soul as mirror metaphor serves as a way for Emerson to signify the sense of exactness in the correspondence between the soul and nature. A further significance of the metaphor is its essentially visual basis; the metaphor intends to describe an exact copy, but the vehicle of the metaphor is vision. Furthermore, in Emerson’s repeated emphasis on the agency of *seeing* we read the vehicle of the metaphor as having rhetorical foundation in the visual. Often Emerson’s metaphors are visual, as opposed to aural, tropes. Just as Emerson denigrates the *word* for its equivocal qualities, so does he elevate the *visual* for its exactness and clarity.

Emerson may not have been fully aware the effect his address would have on his audience and on the religious community at large; its most tangible result was the denial of Emerson’s speaking at The Divinity School for thirty years. His most immediate, and perfunctory response, came from none other than Andrews Norton, writing in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*. Elisa New writes that

all [reviews] are united in their suspicion of Emerson’s confusion of the literary and theological, dramatized by a stylistic extravagance verging on the vatic. The critical agitation around Emerson’s style is so marked that Theophilus Parsons, responding to Andrews Norton’s attack on Emerson . . . expresses noticeable pique at the strange

predominance of aesthetic chatter in a rejoinder so crucial to the defense of Christendom.⁹² Oliver Wendell Holmes writes that the address “caused a profound sensation in religious circles, and led to a controversy, in which Emerson had little more than the part of Patroclus when the Greeks and Trojans fought over his body.”⁹³ The address was challenged in the pages of the *Christian Examiner*, the leading Unitarian journal of the day. The Reverend Henry Ware, a former colleague of Emerson, wrote a letter “in which he expressed the feeling that some of the statements of Emerson’s discourse would tend to overthrow the authority and influence of Christianity.”⁹⁴ Emerson replied, in part,

What you say about the discourse at Divinity College is just what I might expect from your truth and charity, combined with your known opinions. I am not a stick or a stone, as one said in the old time, and could not but feel pain in saying some things in that place and presence which I supposed would meet with dissent, I may say, of dear friends and benefactors of mine. Yet, as my conviction is perfect in the substantial truth of the doctrines of this discourse, and is not very new, you will see at once that it must appear very important that it be spoken; and I thought I could not pay the nobleness of my friends so mean a compliment as to suppress my opposition to their supposed views, out of fear of offence. . . . Let us say our uttermost word, and let the all-pervading truth, as it surely will, judge between us.⁹⁵

Dr. Ware preached a sermon on September 23, in part to emphasize the necessity of adding personality to Emerson’s abstractions; he sent a copy of the sermon, along with another letter, to Emerson. Emerson’s reply is more defensive, but it also demonstrates that Emerson’s “abstractions” are the function of insight, and not subject to reason - - which seems to be, at bottom, a chief complaint by the church against Emerson’s address. Emerson writes:

The letter was right manly and noble. The sermon, too, I have read with attention. If it assails any doctrine of mine, - - perhaps I am not so quick to see it as writers generally, - - certainly I did not feel any disposition to depart from my habitual contentment, that you should say your thought, whilst I say mine. . . . It strikes me very oddly that good and wise men at Cambridge and Boston should think of raising me into an object of criticism. I have always been - - from my very incapacity of methodical writing - - a ‘character libertine,’

free to worship and free to rail, - - luckily when I could make myself understood, but never esteemed near enough to the institutions and mind of society to deserve the notice of masters of literature and religion. . . . I could not give an account of myself, if challenged. I could not possibly give you one of the ‘arguments’ you cruelly hint at, on which any doctrine of mine stands; for I do not know what arguments are in reference to any expression of a thought. I delight in telling you what I think; but if you ask me how I dare say so, or why it is so, I am the most helpless of mortal men. I do not even see that either of those questions admits of an answer.⁹⁶

Oliver Wendell Holmes notes that “the controversy which followed is a thing of the past; Emerson took no part in it He knew his office and has defined it.”⁹⁷ Holmes also acknowledges, however, that the controversy was indeed carried forward: “If Emerson was the moving spirit, [Theodore Parker] was the right arm in the conflict, which in one way or another has been waged up to the present day [1885].”⁹⁸ Certainly Emerson wished to be free of the controversy surrounding his address; he had delivered what was, to his thinking, a necessary state of the church’s affairs. He now wanted to continue with his next series of lectures, and turn his attention to compiling a volume of essays for publication.

The address was published under the title “An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday evening, 15 July, 1838,” by James Munroe and Company in Boston and by Metcalf, Torrey, and Ballou in Cambridge. The pamphlet initially appeared in an edition of 1000 copies, and all but four copies were listed as sold by July 1, 1839; the edition was listed as sold out completely by January 1, 1840, thus selling more copies than had *The American Scholar*, most likely due to its controversial nature.⁹⁹ And, most likely provoked by the address, Sampson Reed included a new preface for the 1838 edition of *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*.

Reed's introduction begins with his concern over the misinterpretation, and misuse, of Swedenborg's writings, and his concern over the growing sensualism he observes in his society. He then turns his attention to a more tangible threat, Transcendentalism. Though Reed does not mention Emerson by name, it is clearly evident that throughout New England Emerson is at the head of the movement. Reed includes a footnote to clarify his use of the term: "By *transcendentalism*, I mean such transcendentalism as we now find, without any reference to its origin, or to the original meaning of the word."¹⁰⁰ He continues with his concern that

the truths of the spiritual sense of the Sacred Scripture, which the Lord has now revealed through his servant Emanuel Swedenborg, will find a very ready reception. *Transcendentalism* will rather be caressed. This is a product of man's own brain; and when the human mind has been compelled to relax its grasp on sensualism, and the philosophy based on the senses, it may be expected first to take refuge here. *Transcendentalism*, even now, offers indications of an approaching popularity in this country. It may be something gained, when the idolater no longer literally worships the work of his own hands; even though he be in heart an idolater still, and worship the creations of his own imagination. So it may be a step forwards from *sensualism* to *transcendentalism*. It may be a necessary step in the progress of the human mind. But they still lie near each other - - almost in contact. There is among insects a class called parasites. Their instinct leads them to deposit their eggs in the bodies of other insects, where, when the young is hatched, it has only to open its mouth and eat up its brother. It would seem to be in a way analogous to this, that Providence often permits one falsity to be removed by another. *Transcendentalism* is the parasite of *sensualism*; and when it shall have done its work, it will be found to be itself a worm, and the offspring of a worm.¹⁰¹

Reed's striking analogy of transcendentalism to a parasitic condition reveals his contempt for those who feed on the (spiritual) body of another, but also demonstrates a qualitative sense of his disgust. A parasite only survives, as is its instinct, by "eating up its brother," an expression chosen by Reed to suggest fratricide. The qualification "instinct" implies no intentional malignancy on the part of the parasite, but the suggestion is far worse: the instinct to devour its host is a part of the *nature* of the parasite; indeed, a parasite is defined by this quality. Thus, Reed

implies that transcendentalism is no worthy attempt at attaining spiritual insight that somehow falls short of its goal, or even a poorly designed and realized philosophy, but rather a diseased condition, for which there is no redemption. These are alarming accusations from a writer of Reed's usual temerity. Reed further elaborates his point with another powerful image:

Imagining themselves spiritual, it is possible that they should be even the lowest of the sensual - - for they may only give to their sensuality wings, by which it may gain an apparent elevation without any real change in its nature - - superadding to its inherent properties that of monstrosity - - becoming a winged serpent - - the monstrous offspring of the infernal influence and a vain imagination. "On thy belly shalt thou go, and dust thou shalt eat, all the days of thy life," is with the serpent the law of its nature; and any attempt to *transcend* this law must rather debase than elevate it. If it presume to raise itself into the air, and live on the nectar of flowers, its real quality will become the more apparent and disgusting - - it will only defile what can afford it no nutriment, and all the birds of heaven will instinctively shun its company. . . . Such "sons of the morning" may be expected in these latter times - - for the morning has indeed come, and, with the beginning of a brighter day than the world has yet seen, are awakened into life forms as monstrous as those of the dark ages.¹⁰²

Reed extends his analogy here by taking the inherent quality of the parasite and making it a monstrosity, the result (presumably) of the diseased nature made maliciously grotesque. In this further attack, transcendentalism has become an evil "life form" with an agenda to execute.

Again, alarmingly, Reed's play on the word "transcend" is willfully malicious - - the full wrath of his uncharacteristic anger is certainly felt here.

Regarding the Transcendental Movement, Robert Spiller notes that

essentially centrifugal in impulse, Concord Transcendentalism served to demolish finally the last firm hold of traditional doctrine on the New England imagination and, when that work had been accomplished, it could be forgotten as a school or movement by most of its leaders. Emerson himself proclaimed both its apotheosis and its obituary in his lecture of January 1842 on "The Transcendentalist" in his series on "The Times."¹⁰³

To its members, and certainly to the mind of its leading thinker, Transcendentalism had not operated in opposition to the goals of the New Church, as may be implied by Sampson Reed's

attack. Spiller writes that “Transcendentalism became an American intellectual, religious, and literary movement, christened first by its enemies who saw in it the admitted importation of dangerous German heresies . . . but soon accepted by its adherents under that name, which no one tried too hard to delimit or define.”¹⁰⁴ Emerson would move forward from this point, and would further define the role of the man capable of not only “communicating religion,” but also of truly *realizing* the world. As he notes in *The Divinity School Address*:

Always the seer is a sayer. Somehow his dream is told. Somehow he publishes it with solemn joy. Sometimes with pencil on canvas; sometimes with chisel on stone; sometimes in towers and aisles of granite, his soul’s worship is builded; sometimes in anthems of indefinite music; but clearest and most permanent, in words.

The man enamored of this excellency, becomes its priest or poet. The office is coeval with the world.¹⁰⁵

Emerson has proclaimed the necessity of clarity of vision for true realization of the world, and has done so with visual metaphors. Elisa New writes:

Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” codifies all the implicit hints of a new language theory gathering in Unitarian writing of the early nineteenth century. The slow evolution toward similitude that made [Joseph] Buckminster’s Christ an imitable model, [William Ellery] Channing’s God a fashioner of images, and [Sylvester] Judd’s man, God’s best Word, finds logical outlet in Emerson’s mandate for a theology as a poetics. Or, for the Word’s fresh harvest out of the fecundity of words. The aim of the sermon is nothing less than a renewal of Christianity through a rehabilitation of its language. This will involve a reissuance of the theologian’s terms in a literary currency, but first it will require a scourge of theological clichés, among them the very elements constitutive of Christian faith.¹⁰⁶

Emerson’s movement toward “similitude” is nothing less than a reconstitution of language itself, a reconsideration of language at its most elemental level - - where the word is one with the thing it represents. This effort requires characteristics not of the priest, but of the *poet*. Above all persons, Emerson’s “Poet” is the one capable of fully making real the world in *language*.

Notes

1. Quoted in Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist: Volume I* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1945), 400.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 403.
4. Ibid., 405.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 404.
7. Cameron, 406.
8. Quoted in Cameron, 406-407.
9. Ibid., 407-408.
10. Ibid., 408-409.
11. Sampson Reed, "A Dissertation on the Evidence from the Light of Nature of a Future Retribution." In *Sampson Reed: Primary Source Material for Emerson Studies. Swedenborg Studies I* (New York City and Westchester, PA: Monographs for the Swedenborg Foundation, 1992), 10.
12. Sampson Reed, *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*. Reprint of first edition, Boston, 1826. In Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist: Volume II* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1945), 25.
13. Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 252.
14. Alfred Kazin, *An American Procession: The Major American Writers from 1830-1930 - - The Critical Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 32.
15. Richardson, 245.
16. Ibid., 246.
17. Ibid., 252.
18. Ibid., 254.

19. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson vol V: 1835-1838*. Ed. Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 221.
20. Ibid., 221-22.
21. Richardson, 262.
22. Robert E. Spiller, "Introduction" to *The American Scholar*. In *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson vol I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Albert R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 49.
23. Ibid., 49-50.
24. Emerson, *Journals*, 347.
25. Ibid., 364-65.
26. Richardson, 262.
27. Spiller, 50
28. Ibid.
29. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar*. In *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson vol I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Albert R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1971), 52.
30. Richardson, 263.
31. Richardson does point out, however, that when Emerson later composed *Representative Men*, "not one of his models was an American" (263).
32. Richardson, 264-65.
33. Emerson, *The American Scholar*, 66.
34. Ibid., 52.
35. Ibid., 53.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 54.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*. In *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson vol I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Albert R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1971), 31.

42. Emerson, *The American Scholar*, 59.

43. Ibid., 55.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 60.

48. Ibid., 56.

49. Ibid., 57.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., 62.

53. Ibid., 68.

54. Clarence Paul Hotson, "Sampson Reed, A Teacher of Emerson," *The New England Quarterly* 2:2 (April 1929), 268-69.

55. Ibid., 271-72.

56. E. Bruce Glenn, "Gleanings from Emerson's Study," *New Church Life* (March 1955), 124.

57. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson vol VIII 1841-1843*. Eds. William H. Gilman and J. E. Parsons (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 182-183.

58. Clarence Paul Hotson, *Emerson and Swedenborg*. Ph.D. diss., Harvard, 1929. Also see Hotson, "Sampson Reed, A Teacher of Emerson," 268.

59. Robert E. Spiller, "Introduction," *The American Scholar*. In *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson vol I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Albert R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 51.
60. Sampson Reed, Review of "An Oration, delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837," *New Jerusalem Magazine* (October 1837), 67.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., 72.
63. Ibid.
64. Hotson, "Sampson Reed, A Teacher of Emerson," 276-77.
65. Robert E. Spiller, "Introduction," *The Divinity School Address*. In *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson vol I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 71.
66. Ibid., 72.
67. Ibid., 71.
68. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson Volume V 1835-1838*. Ed. Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 464.
69. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Divinity School Address*. In *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson vol I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 76.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 76-77.
72. Ibid., 78.
73. Ibid., 82.
74. Ibid., 77.
75. Ibid., 82.
76. Ibid., 77.
77. Ibid., 92.

78. Ibid., 79.
79. Ibid., 80.
80. Ibid., 80-81.
81. Ibid., 80.
82. Ibid., 81.
83. Ibid., 85.
84. Ibid., 85-86.
85. Ibid., 84.
86. Ibid., 92.
87. Ibid., 85.
88. Ibid., 87.
89. Ibid., 90.
90. Ibid., 92.
91. Ibid., 93.
92. Elisa New, *The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 32.
93. Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1885), 116.
94. Quoted in Holmes, 124.
95. Quoted in Holmes, 124-25.
96. Quoted in Holmes, 125-26.
97. Holmes, 127.
98. Ibid.
99. Spiller, "Introduction," *The Divinity School Address*, 74-75.

100. Sampson Reed, "Preface," *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* (Boston: Otis Clapp, 1838), vi.
101. Ibid., vi-vii.
102. Ibid., vii-viii.
103. Spiller, "Introduction," *The Divinity School Address*, 73.
104. Ibid.
105. Emerson, *The Divinity School Address*, 84.
106. New, 38.

Chapter 5

Emerson's Poet: A Very High Sort of Seeing

With *The American Scholar* and *The Divinity School Address*, Emerson helped to cut free the New England imagination from the considerable weight of its Calvinist heritage. At the same time, Emerson began to move more toward a career as a literary man than a religious one. He continued lecturing regularly, but after 1839 he did not preach again. Many of his lectures were constructed from his journal entries, as usual, but were then transformed into essays for publication. His first book of essays had come with great difficulty; Emerson had been hard pressed attending to lectures and frequent visitors and, in the end, decided to issue a single book of essays instead of two volumes together as he had originally intended. *Essays: First Series* was published by James Munroe in Boston in March 1841; *Essays: Second Series*, was published in October 1844. Emerson had intended to finish a second essay on nature to tie the first and second volumes together thematically. As he had not been able to refine the second nature essay to his liking, the connecting essay, and a pivotal work for Emerson, became the first essay of the new book: "The Poet."

Just as Emerson had set precedents with the publication of *Nature*, and with the delivery of *The American Scholar* and *The Divinity School Address*, he would further sever ties with New England orthodoxy with the essay "The Poet." Elisa New comments that "The Poet" "completes the work of the 'Divinity School Address' by transferring from priest to poet the calling of ministry."¹ New further adds this accurate insight:

Poetry, Emerson reasoned in the 1830s and 1840s, was the antithesis of orthodoxy. Capacious where orthodoxy was crabbed, inspiring where orthodoxy sapped, poetry stood in something of the relationship to doctrine that the New Testament had to the

Hebrew Bible, and, in turn, Protestantism to the Pope. With the Church dead of its own weight, it was the poet, learning from Nature, who would rebuild the sanctuary orthodoxy had despoiled. Hence, the technique of “The Divinity School Address” - - but also of “The Poet” as well - - is to liberate divinity from the strictures of orthodoxy by mandating a new law on the same scale and expansiveness as the law of imagination. . . . with language given plenipotent, if not total power, Emerson could reclaim for the sons of Adam a faith in language’s divine possibility.²

Emerson, through articulating the role and responsibility of the poet, redefined clerical responsibility in moral as well as aesthetic terms. Thus his significance in American aesthetics: his poetic and language theory set precedents that transcend his own time and circumstance, and continue to influence American art, literature, and visual media. No doubt there are some excellent poems penned by Emerson, such as “The Snow-storm” and “Days,” which fully achieve all that Emerson himself requires of the office of the poet. Still other poems are composed in finely wrought verse, but, as Elisa New notes, “with a few notable exceptions, Emerson’s poems are unnervingly undistinguished. . . . Measured strictly on their own terms they lack certain Emersonian components - - will power, or that verbal adrenalin that so dynamizes his prose.”³ This study, therefore, does not comment on the quality of Emerson’s poetry by the fact of its exclusion; rather, it is in his theory that Emerson affects American artists in the early twentieth century. As Elisa New comments, “the paradox of Emerson’s career is that his failure as a poet derives from his brilliance as a theorist.”⁴

Emerson was no doubt a more substantial theorist about poetry than he was a poet in practice.

Bliss Perry reminds us that

Emerson’s own estimate of his skill as a poet was extremely modest. “I, who am only an amateur poet,” - - he wrote to Dr. Furness in 1844. In writing to Lydia Jackson, shortly before their marriage, he went into more detail: “I am born a poet, - - of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature and vocation. My singing, to be sure, is very husky, and is for the most part in prose. Still I am poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear

lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in matter, and specially of the harmonies between these and those.” That last sentence, roughly translated, means that we are to expect in his verse much of the characteristic thought of his prose; and there will always be some readers who discover the real Emerson in his poetry, as there will always be others who prefer to find their Emerson in his *Journals* or *Essays*.⁵

Emerson’s “vocation” is his continually shifting role as New England setter of intellectual (and aesthetic) precedents. Richard Lee Francis makes an appropriate insight in this regard:

it is the poet who represents the final realization of Emerson’s vocational quest, the fullest embodiment of all the previous roles as naturalist, moralist, and scholar. To that extent, “The Poet” . . . rounded out Emerson’s structure, leaving the rest of *Essays: Second Series* as essentially an exercise in elaboration. “The Poet” is therefore analogous to *Nature* in its complex statement and stylistic intricacy.⁶

Indeed, “The Poet” affirms Emerson’s shifting emphasis to the poet, not the priest, as the arbiter of spiritual significance for the self. He is able to do this on the basis of two principal tenets: that the poet is capable of liberating the Word from its necrotic associations, and that language itself is fluid. In the process of defining the poet’s role, Emerson also articulates an aesthetic of organicism, one that will determine the limits of language and the power of visual perception.

Emerson’s essays usually begin with an opening poem; “The Poet” begins with two, and both are significant in their form and in Emerson’s juxtaposition of them. Emerson here, as in the poem which introduces *Nature*, is the theorist practicing his craft in the truest sense: the poems illustrate in fact what Emerson works to outline in theory. The first poem is a ten-line single stanza in iambic tetrameter with few, but important, variations.

A moody child and wildly wise
Pursued the game with joyful eyes,
Which chose, like meteors, their way,
And rived the dark with private ray:
They overleapt the horizon’s edge,
Searched with Apollo’s privilege;
Through man, and woman, and sea, and star,

Saw the dance of nature forward far;
Through worlds, and races, and terms, and times,
Saw musical order, and pairing rhymes.⁷

It is important to recognize, initially, that the subject of the poem is not the “moody child,” but is the “joyful eyes,” which, as though independent of the child, “chose . . . their way.” Emerson’s faith in intuition over doctrine is suggested by the descriptive distinction between the “moody child” and his “joyful eyes,” eyes which are “like meteors,” blazing, fiery, and led by their own path, not by the child. This is a fundamental component of Emerson’s visual aesthetic: the eyes seek and recognize eternal form in the poet’s mind. In other words, thought follows intuition. And intuition, in this sense, is associated with sight, or perhaps more accurately, with visual perception. Emerson’s descriptive phrase “wildly wise” modifies the child, but does so in a way that suggests he is wild because he is wise, if “wild” here is meant to suggest unencumbered by orthodoxy. We might interpret “the game” as a kind of hide-and-seek in the child’s world, perhaps, but it suggests as well the “game” of the poet: seeking and perceiving eternal forms beyond superficial appearance. Coincidentally, the end-stopped, metrical regularity is altered in line eight, which introduces a rising rhythm as the eyes perceive, beyond “man, and woman, and sea, and star,” the “dance of nature, forward far.” The term “dance” implies that which the poet seeks: rhythm, organic form (if the dance is assumed to be spontaneous; it is the “dance of *nature*,” not of *forms*), and continual movement and change. Before this dance “worlds, and races, and terms, and times” cannot stand with permanence; the irruption of anapestic feet in the last two lines demonstrate in execution the feel of the “musical order” and the “pairing rhymes.” It is this facility more so than the words that communicates the poem’s intent.

The second poem, taken from Emerson's own "Ode to Beauty," is a single, four line stanza, composed in iambic trimeter. The regularity of the meter, however, is underscored by the implication of timelessness, as indicated by the poem's terms:

Olympian bards who sung
Divine ideas below,
Which always find us young,
And always keep us so.⁸

The "Olympian bards" in this poem "sung / Divine ideas below." Exhibited in these two lines is a movement in time; the bards *have sung*. But line three suggests that the ideas, though sung in the past, still resonate, and are thus timeless: "Which always find us young." The ideas *sung* are still being found, and always find the poet "young." Time, it seems for the poet, is suspended in the presence of these divine ideas. Line four suggests yet again that time is secondary, an ordered concern of the mind, and not an eternal form; the ideas which find us young "always keeps us so." Time is suspended in the moment of perception, and again it is suggested that thought follows (or *will follow*) intuition. Emerson held this idea well before its articulation in this essay; he wrote in a letter to James Freeman Clarke on February 27, 1839, "I well know that poetry that needs a date is no poetry."⁹

At the heart of Emerson's essay lies this wonderfully concise aphorism: "Art is the path of the creator to his work."¹⁰ Joseph Slater refers to this as "an entire aesthetic in ten words";¹¹ the phrase helps to refine Emerson's central claims made for the poet. On the surface this expression resembles a metaphor. If it were, then the intransitive verb *is* would act as a measure equivalent values, and the statement would indicate an equation of the value before the verb (*Art*) and the values after the verb (*path, creator, work*). These values are equivalent in the sense that they all

express a different perception of the phenomenon of nature. However, *path* does not rename, modify, qualify, or quantify the meaning of the term “art.” Instead, the four nouns - - “art,” “path,” “creator,” and “work” - - all require further elucidation. As has already been demonstrated, Emerson’s poet is not concerned with timelessness. Therefore, the path does not suggest a movement from one point to the next, or from one state of being to another (though this may be, in part, implicit in the definition in an atemporal sense). The *creator* is the poet, who does indeed “create” by his unique ability of perception of and unique combinations of language in order to liberate new, original meanings. Emerson writes:

The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre. For the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe. Therefore the poet is not any permissive potentate, but is emperor in his own right.¹²

The poet does not eschew form; in Emerson’s determination, “it is a proof of the shallowness of the doctrine of beauty, as it lies in the minds of our amateurs, that men seem to have lost the perception of the instant dependence of form upon the soul.”¹³ *Work* is the process of this perception, not its end result; the forms the poet observes, or perceives, are ever changing, and the poem’s rendered symbols are, to use Emerson’s term, *fluxional*. The *path*, then, is also process - - the process of intuition, possible in all humans but uniquely active in the poet. Thus, art is a means, not an end, and the significance of this means is the degree to which the poet reconnects us to the world. Emerson has removed, or at least defeated, time from his concept of the poet’s work, so that his aesthetic has a quality of timelessness; but it also contains elements of form as well.

The most significant shape in Emerson's scheme is, of course, the circle. The 1841 essay "Circles" begins this way:

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms.¹⁴

Reading this "first of forms," or, because "it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes all things ugly," requires of the poet a unique condition of seeing. Emerson calls for a poet who "re-attaches things to nature and the Whole, - - reattaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight, - - disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts."¹⁵ "Seeing" corresponds to the figure of the eye, and the eye to the circle, the "first of forms." Emerson's ten word aesthetic statement - - "Art is the path of the creator to his work" - - may be applied to the physical model defined in "Circles":

Eye = first circle / *Creator*

Horizon = second circle / *Work*

Repetition of the primal figure throughout nature / *the Path*

Art is the creator, the path, and the work in the sense of *process*, not product. Emerson's circles never *quite* close on themselves, which seems to suggest an evolution upward:

But nature has a higher end, in the production of new individuals, than security, namely, *ascension*, or, the passage of the soul into higher forms. . . . The poet . . . resigns himself to his mood, and that thought which agitated him is expressed, but *alter idem*, in a manner totally new. The expression is organic, or, the new type which things take when liberated. As, in the sun, objects paint their images on the retina of the eye, so they, sharing the aspiration of the whole universe, tend to paint a far more delicate copy of their essence in his mind.¹⁶

The spiraling form in nature is eternal; in language, the spiral pattern suggests the way in which words become distanced from their original associations. However, the spiral also implies a means by which the poet might realize the original relation of words to things by reattaching them in the opposite direction, in ways that recognize the passage of time (original associations of words with things) and transcend time (liberating words from static connections, making their symbolic possibilities eternal). The poet, then, must be able to recognize the spiral - - “the circuit of things through forms” - - in nature. That is, first, the poet must have sight - - physical sight, perception, and insight - - to translate the forms of nature in the language of man. Emerson explains the qualifications and the process:

This insight, which expresses itself by what is called Imagination, is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others. The path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them? A spy they will not suffer; a lover, a poet, is the transcendence of their own nature, - - him they will suffer. The condition of true naming, on the poet’s part, is his resigning himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms, and accompanying that.¹⁷

The “very high sort of seeing” Emerson describes here is the unique condition of seeing possessed by the poet, which combines sight, perception, and insight; but, it is important to recognize that Emerson emphasizes the visual, not only in a symbolic, but in a very real sense, as essential to the poet and primary over all apparatuses of sensory input. The significance of sight is essential to the poet’s task, by “sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others.” The path is the art of the poet, in the nominal sense; in the active sense, the path is the conduit through which the poet communicates. Emerson’s choice of the term *translucid* seems to express very precisely this intention. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “translucid” not as a noun, but as implied in the term “translucidity,” defined as “the quality of

shining through, or permitting light to shine through.” Also, the *OED* lists “translucidity” as “the quality or condition of being translucent,” noting an early appearance of the term *translucidity* in Rabelais in 1694. *Translucid* seems to be a term Emerson construes as a noun to make use of the prefix *trans*, meaning through or across, and *lucid*, meaning, as defined by the *OED*, clear, bright, rational, sane. Emerson wants to convey not only clarity of sight, but clarity through *forms*. The poet’s role is that of “namer,” but, given the shifting quality of language (and the ability of language to change, in the hands of the poet, to create new symbols), making forms clear to others is the poet’s role. So where does this proposition leave the condition of language?

Emerson uses the terms *words*, *language*, and *symbol* almost interchangeably - - *almost*, because in consideration of the distinction between symbol and language, the symbol is the key to understanding *form*; words inhabit symbols, and the quality of symbols is, in Emerson’s terminology, “fluxional.” “All the facts of animal economy,” writes Emerson, “are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact. He [the poet] uses forms according to the life, and not according to the form. This is true science.”¹⁸ Vivian Hopkins gives one of the most insightful critical interpretations of Emerson’s realization of the power of the symbol:

The symbol is the objective realization of the poet’s power to “go with” the forms of nature. Readers are electrified by a poet’s glowing symbols; indeed, the imaginative effect of a symbol upon his readers becomes the test of a poet’s success in perceiving nature’s flowing. Since the poet finds this spirit in natural objects, his realization of it in the symbol shows the relation between symbolic and organic form; Nature, in Emersonian language, is herself a trope.¹⁹

Emerson’s description of language constitutes one of the most cohesive passages of “The Poet”:

By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to everyone its

own name and not another's, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary. The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin. But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree. What we call nature, is a certain self-regulated motion, or change; and nature does all things by her own hands, and does not leave another to baptize her, but baptizes herself; and this through the metamorphosis again.²⁰

Thus Emerson envisions the symbol first, then the one true word to inhabit the symbol. The poet “perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form.”²¹ Man uses “the forms which express that life and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature.”²² The “facts of animal economy,” which Emerson lists as “sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth,”²³ all constitute symbols which connect the world to man, and “impel” man to a higher form. Again, Emerson’s circles never close, but spiral inevitably upward, toward “a new and higher fact.”

Emerson’s view is that language is temporary, but symbols are fluxional embodiments of eternal forms. Symbol is synonymous with thought. He writes:

The world being thus put under the mind for verb and noun, the poet is he who can articulate it. For, though life is great, and fascinates, and absorbs, - - and though all men are intelligent of the symbols through which it is named, - - yet they cannot originally use them. We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workmen, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death are all emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts.²⁴

The poet is he who can, like Lynceus, “see through the earth” and “turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession.”²⁵ Language is the vehicle available to the

poet; it is the material at his disposal for communication. Language, in this view, is superficial, dead, separated from its original association by time and by dogmatic inflexibility. The value of language for the poet is its malleability and its transparency; thus the poet, through his insight and clarity of vision may restore original associations of words and things, and may also use words to inhabit symbols, creating “new and higher facts.” The *symbol* is the means by which the poet utilizes language and transforms thought into new, original thoughts.

This process is made possible by Emerson’s declaration of the symbol’s significance: “For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead.”²⁶ Upon this declaration, and these determinations regarding language and symbol, Emerson makes his clear distinction between the poet and the mystic:

Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. . . . Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one. . . . And the mystic must be steadily told, - - All that you say is just as true without the tedious use of that symbol as with it. Let us have a little algebra, instead of this trite rhetoric, - - universal signs, instead of these village symbols, - - and we shall both be gainers. The history of hierarchies seems to show, that all religious error consisted in making the symbol too stark and solid, and, at last, nothing but an excess of the organ of language.²⁷

Bliss Perry reminds us that “no one who knew [Emerson] in his lifetime, and no one today turns the pages of his earliest *Journals* or glances at his first book, the *Nature* volume of 1836, has ever doubted his idealism or denied that this idealism is strongly colored by mysticism. . . . his mystical tendencies were innate.”²⁸ No doubt this is in some measure true, but there are traces of Emerson’s distrust of metaphysics early on. For example, he writes in his Journal on February 22, 1824:

All metaphysicians are mortified to find how entirely the whole materials of understanding are derived from sense. No man is understood who speculates on mind or character until he borrows the / emphatic / specific / imagery of the Sense. I fear the progress of Metaphysical philosophy may be found to consist in nothing else than the progressive introduction of apposite metaphors.²⁹

Even in his early lectures, in *Nature*, and in later addresses, Emerson contains a twofold strain: his progress toward the role of the poet, and not the priest, as the disseminator of truth and receiver of divine revelation often utilizes metaphor rather than direct language; also, Emerson's habit of using the oxymoronic phrase is obvious. But Emerson uses this style often to express ideas that *escape* the possibilities of language; he is interested in "nature" as ideal form, the mask upon which is imprinted the mind of God, but also nature as physical fact. And though Henry James Sr. referred to Emerson as the "man without a handle," Emerson the naturalist exists coincidentally with Emerson the idealist. "Language is fossil poetry" seems indeed the expression of an idealist, but this same writer penned the phrase "symbols are signs of natural facts," and the facts to which he refers are concrete. "America is a poem in our eyes," he writes in "The Poet," "its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for meters."³⁰ The expression of the forthcoming "meters" will be poetic, but the eyes and the geography are physical, concrete. The poet will communicate the forms behind the physical world we experience; or, as in Melville's later phrasing, the poet will see "the storm behind the storm we feel."

The poet's ability for this action is not solely dependent on the poet's talent; as has been determined, the poet depends on the fluidity of language. But also, the poet serves as a "liberator," severing ties between language and its observed signification. In the opening paragraph of "The Poet," Emerson offers his criticism of versifiers:

Theologians think it a pretty air-castle to talk of the spiritual meaning of a ship or a cloud, of a city or a contract, but they prefer to come again to the solid ground of historical evidence; and even the poets are concerned with a civil and conformed manner of living, and to write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience.³¹

The “conformed manner of living” has its impact in the special significance of the term *form*, the solid ground of historical fact, the predetermined form that poets utilize from the fancy and not experience. “The highest minds,” he continues, “have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact.”³² Emerson describes an endless deferment of meanings in language, which may be thought of as another instance of Emerson’s model of the “upward spiraling” form he utilizes later in the essay. Emerson’s assertion “Poets are . . . liberating gods” refers to the ability of the poet to emancipate conventional associations of language and facts or, more precisely, facts as represented through language that has become deadened. Indeed, Emerson uses the terms “liberation,” “emancipation,” and “metamorphosis” with great frequency in describing the poet.

The following passage from the essay demonstrates in form and content Emerson’s fervor:

If the imagination intoxicates the poet, it is not inactive in other men. The metamorphosis excites in the beholder an emotion of joy. The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men. We seem to be touched by a wand, which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really got a new sense, and found within their world another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop.³³

Emerson then proceeds, as he often does when caught in a fit of excitement, to cast off a list of examples across history; in this case, he fills out a three hundred plus word single sentence, even beginning with the qualification that “I will not now consider how much this makes the charm of algebra and mathematics.” The first sentence of the next paragraph exactly frames the passage by

repetition: “The poets are thus liberating gods.”³⁴ Certainly Emerson’s central thesis is not mere sophistry, partly because of the great wealth of examples from all disciplines from which he draws; the poet emancipates language from its staid associations with eternal forms, because of the poet’s visual and perceptual abilities and because of his recognition of the fluidity of language, which makes this liberation initially possible. Thus the poet realizes words are thoughts, that “poetry was all written before time was,”³⁵ and, “by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives [thoughts] a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object,”³⁶ and “did not stop at the color, or the form, but read their meaning; neither may he rest in this meaning, but he makes the same objects exponents of his new thought.”³⁷ This quality separates the poet from the mystic - - a distinction of severe significance.

Emerson had heretofore regarded Emanuel Swedenborg as a poet. However, as his demands on the “poet” grew more stringent, he began to consider Swedenborg’s mysticism in conflict with his poetic ability to perceive the real world beyond the merely apparent. Seemingly anticipating *Representative Men* (1850), Emerson began to dismiss Swedenborg as a poet. Swedenborg would represent Emerson’s “mystic,” but Emerson seemed to value this station less than that of the poet. That Shakespeare would stand for the representative poet seems peripheral to Emerson’s separation from Swedenborgian doctrine. As we have seen, Emerson admired Emanuel Swedenborg as a man who “stands eminently for the translator of nature into thought. I do not know the man in history to whom things stood so uniformly for words.”³⁸ In “The American Scholar” address, Emerson singles him out for special consideration:

There is one man of genius who has done much for this philosophy of life, whose literary value has never yet been rightly estimated; - - I mean Emanuel Swedenborg. . . . he saw and showed the connexion between nature and the affections of the soul. He pierced the

emblematic or spiritual character of the visible, audible, tangible world. . . . he showed the mysterious bond that allies moral evil to the foul material forms, and has given in epical parables a theory of insanity, of beasts, of unclean and fearful things.³⁹

In both instances of praise Emerson is still claiming Swedenborg as a poet, rather than a mystic; he notes Swedenborg's "literary value," his "epical parables," and his translation of "nature into thought." This same claim severed ties between Emerson and Sampson Reed. Though Bliss Perry recognizes an inherent mysticism in Emerson's corpus of work, Emerson was not mystic enough to embrace Swedenborg as a prophet, in spite of his obvious admiration for him, as well as his sincere affection for Sampson Reed. The dissolution of this particular relationship carries more significance than has previously been noted by scholars; Emerson's separation from Reed, and consequently from his other New Church connections, resulted in a backlash of protest denouncing Emerson and his work for many years, in spite of the fact, as Bliss Perry correctly notes regarding Clarence Hotson's statement, "that he owed far more to Swedenborg than he ever confessed."⁴⁰ However, when Emerson published his lecture series *Representative Men* in 1850, Swedenborg stood for the Mystic; Shakespeare stood for the Poet. Contrasting the two portraits brings into clearer relief the distinction between poet and mystic, qualities which, for Emerson, uncomfortably overlap.

Emerson's lecture on Swedenborg is the longest among his *Representative Men*, which suggests that there is more ambivalence in Emerson's mind regarding his mystic. Moreover, Swedenborg's portrait is the only one which serves to describe Swedenborg not by what he *is*, but by what he *lacks*; Emerson seems to spend more energy condemning Swedenborg than praising him. Emerson's distinction between poet and mystic occurs early in the essay:

I have sometimes thought that he would render the greatest service to modern criticism, who shall draw the line of relation that subsists between Shakspeare and Swedenborg. The human mind stands ever in perplexity, demanding intellect, demanding sanctity, impatient equally of each without the other. The reconciler has not yet appeared. If we tire of saints, Shakspeare is our city of refuge. Yet the instincts presently teach, that the problem of Essence must take precedent of all others, the questions of Whence? and What? and Whither? and the solution of these must be in a life, and not in a book.⁴¹

Emerson's regard of this distinction, interestingly, seems to produce in him an anxiety which erupts in the guise of hostility toward Swedenborg's lack of poetic skill. He recognizes the mystic's gift as "an access to the secrets and structures of nature, by some higher method, than by experience,"⁴² but takes several pages more before approaching Swedenborg himself, and then proceeds with biography rather than analysis. It appears to the reader as though Emerson has some difficulty in evaluating the significance of the mystic as separate from the poet (a problem he will not encounter in reverse in the Shakespeare essay). Emerson addresses Swedenborg's life in scientific endeavor before the divine revelations began as though he is setting up a method by which he may claim the importance of the mystic while at the same time giving himself an excuse to disallow Swedenborg the title of "Poet." Emerson writes:

The genius which was to penetrate the science of the age with a far more subtle science, to pass the bounds of space and time; venture into the dim spirit-realm, and attempt to establish a new religion in the world, begun its lessons in quarries and forges, in the smelting-pot and crucible, in shipyards and dissecting-rooms.⁴³

The passage is, oddly, marked by qualifiers: Swedenborg would penetrate the "dim spirit-realm" (as opposed to the clarity of vision with which the poet does so), and "attempts" to establish a new religion. Swedenborg's background is significant in Emerson's assessment of his work: "Swedenborg is systematic and respective of the world in every sentence: all the means are orderly given; his faculties work with astronomical punctuality, and this admirable writing is pure

from all pertness or egotism.”⁴⁴ This seems far from Emerson’s poetic ideal, against which he seems to be evaluating the mystic. However, he does credit Swedenborg’s prophetic qualities:

These grand rhymes or returns in nature, - - the dear best-known face startling us at every turn under a mask so unexpected that we think it the face of a stranger, and carrying up the semblance into divine forms, - - delighted the prophetic eye of Swedenborg, and he must be reckoned a leader in that revolution, which, by giving to science an idea, has given to an aimless accumulation of experiments, guidance and form and a beating heart.⁴⁵

Again, it Swedenborg’s background in science that supports his “prophetic eye.” Of

Swedenborg’s book *The Animal Kingdom* Emerson writes:

He saw nature “wreathing through an everlasting spiral, with wheels that never run dry, on axles that never creak,” and sometimes sought “to uncover those secret recesses where nature is sitting at the fires in the depths of her laboratory;” whilst the picture comes recommended by the hard fidelity with which it is based on practical anatomy. It is remarkable that this sublime genius decides peremptorily for the analytic, against the synthetic method, and, in a book whose genius is a daring poetic synthesis, claims to confine himself to a rigid experience.⁴⁶

The passage suggests Emerson’s begrudging admiration for Swedenborg, as though he would like to be able to reconcile the Swedenborgian enthusiasm he shared with Sampson Reed with the disillusionment he suffered over the separation from Reed’s, and the New Church’s, circle.

Emerson states that Swedenborg’s book is “peremptorily for the analytic, against the synthetic method,” while in the next clause claiming the book’s genius is its “daring poetic synthesis.” This seems hardly Emersonian criticism. Nonetheless, it is Swedenborg’s “poetic synthesis” he admires, not the mysticism for which Swedenborg stands, and which Emerson argues against.

Indeed, Emerson’s quotations from Swedenborg’s works sound very familiar to readers of Emerson’s own work. For example:

The hardihood and thoroughness of his study of nature required a theory of forms also. “Forms ascend in order from the lowest to the highest. The lowest form is angular, or the terrestrial and corporeal. The second and next higher form is the circular, which is also

called the perpetual-angular, because the circumference of a circle is a perpetual angle. The form above this, is the spiral, parent and measure of circular forms: its diameters are not rectilinear, but variously circular, and have a spherical surface for centre; therefore it is called the perpetual-circular. The form above this is the vortical, or perpetual-spiral: next, perpetual-vortical, or celestial: last, the perpetual-celestial, or spiritual.”⁴⁷

Emerson quotes similar passages regarding the doctrine of correspondence and organic form. It seems as if Emerson recognizes for praise in Swedenborg what he himself took from Swedenborg’s work for his own use, or at least ideas Emerson, directly or indirectly, had come to by way of Swedenborg’s influence.

Having come thus far in a fairly neutral assessment of Swedenborg on his own merits, Emerson finally arrives at his point of departure, the point at which he can no longer sustain any commonality with Swedenborg:

Having adopted the belief that certain books of the Old and New Testaments were exact allegories, or written in the angelic and ecstatic mode, he employed his remaining years in extracting from the literal the universal sense. He had borrowed from Plato, the fine fable of “a most ancient people, men better than we, and dwelling nigher to the gods,” and Swedenborg added, that they used the earth symbolically; that these, when they saw terrestrial objects, did not think at all about them, but only about those which they signified.⁴⁸

Emerson’s recognition of Swedenborg’s use of “fables” and allegory had caused the split between him and Sampson Reed; the fault was not really Reed’s, but Emerson’s differing interpretation of Swedenborg. Emerson continues to chart Swedenborg’s fall:

His perception of nature is not human and universal, but is mystical and Hebraic. He fastens each natural object to a theologic notion; a horse signifies carnal understanding; a tree, perception; the moon, faith; a cat means this; an ostrich that; an artichoke, this other; and poorly tethers every symbol to a several ecclesiastic sense. The slippery Proteus is not so easily caught.⁴⁹

Artichoke? Emerson seems almost malicious, or at least vindictive in his criticism, to bow to the absurd for his ammunition. Swedenborg “saw things in their law, in likeness of function, not of

structure.”⁵⁰ Here, as in the previous passage, Emerson has switched from past tense to present tense; his critical judgment has become overarching and applicable to the whole of Swedenborg, or at least to the Swedenborg we are left with at the end of his life. Perhaps Emerson is unfairly staining the early work of Swedenborg with the ‘Hebraic mysticism’ of the later work; in any event, this method of criticism seems more personal than professional. Indeed, Emerson here seems to be evaluating Swedenborg by responding to Reed:

Whether a self-inquisitorial habit that he grew into from jealousy of the sins to which men of thought are liable, he has acquired in disentangling and demonstrating that particular form of moral disease an acumen which no conscience can resist. I refer to his feeling of the profanation of thinking to what is good “from scientifics.” “To reason about faith, is to doubt and deny.” He was painfully alive to the difference between knowing and doing, and this sensibility is incessantly expressed. Philosophers are therefore vipers, cockatrices, asps, hemorrhoids, presters, and flying serpents; literary men are conjurors and charlatans.⁵¹

The “flying serpent” image refers, of course, to Reed’s 1838 “Preface” to *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*. This suggests that Emerson felt a personal disillusionment with Reed (particularly after 1838) and included him, however covertly, in his continually demeaning portrait of Swedenborg.

Emerson suggests late in the essay that perhaps Swedenborg “paid the penalty of introverted faculties. . . . It is hard to carry a full cup, and this man, profusely endowed in heart and mind, early fell into dangerous discord with himself.”⁵² Emerson writes:

In his “Animal Kingdom” [Swedenborg] surprised us by declaring that he loved analysis and not synthesis; and now, after his fiftieth year, he fell into jealousy of his intellect, and, though aware that truth is not solitary nor is goodness solitary, but both must ever mix and marry, he makes war on his mind, takes the part of the conscious against it, and on all occasions traduces and blasphemes it. The violence is instantly avenged. . . . There is an air of infinite grief and the sound of wailing all over and through this lurid universe. A vampyre sits in the seat of the prophet and turns with gloomy appetite to the images of pain. . . . Except Rabelais and Dean Swift, nobody ever had such science of filth and corruption.⁵³

Although Emerson sounds as though he is describing a man losing his mind, he is simply evaluating Swedenborg as a writer of prophecy, a receiver of the word of God, perhaps suggesting an inherent harmfulness of mysticism. Indeed, Emerson warns that “these books should be used with caution. It is dangerous to sculpture these evanescent images of thought.”⁵⁴ Though Emerson had called early in the essay for a writer who could separate the mystic from the poet, he seems here to have little problem doing so himself. Swedenborg is the *representative* mystic, and we are to assume that his state and status as such is true of all mystics. However, it is difficult to read Emerson’s essay without the feeling of a personal attachment to the man and not simply his position or gifts. Emerson, naturally, had no occasion to confront Swedenborg, and he may be incorporating his discomfort with the New Church and with Sampson Reed into this supposedly singular portrait.

Emerson sates that “the vice of Swedenborg’s mind is its theological determination.”⁵⁵ He further adds, “When he mounts into heaven, I do not hear its language. A man should not tell me he has walked among the angels; his proof is, that his eloquence shall make me one.”⁵⁶ This is the same criticism against mystics Emerson mounts in “The Poet,” regarding the use of symbols. Clearly Emerson sees no poet in the mystic; however, there is at least the *capacity* for mysticism in the poet. Bliss Perry writes

his mystical tendencies were innate. If he had never been educated beyond primary school, had never read Plato and Plotinus, St. Augustine and George Fox and Coleridge, he would still have been a mystic by nature, like countless illiterate men and women in all ages and of every race. . . . The men and women who seek a direct way to God who are characterized by their “intimate consciousness of Divine Presence,” are often under-vocabularied; and even those who are eloquent find that the experience which they wish to describe is ineffable. The fact that Emerson happened to be well educated, and that all the influences surrounding his early life and his professional studies tended to emphasize the

significance of philosophy and religion, are secondary influences confirming, but not originating, the natural bent of his mind.⁵⁷

As Perry implies, it may not be possible for the mystic to be a poet; if this implication is valid, then Emerson is futile to wait for one who will draw a line between the two. Indeed, Perry's thinking is supported by Emerson in this passage regarding Swedenborg:

It is remarkable that this man who by his perception of symbols saw the poetic construction of things and the primary relation of mind to matter, remained entirely devoid of the whole apparatus of poetic expression, which that perception creates. He knew the grammar and rudiments of the *Mother-Tongue*, - - how could he not read off one strain into music?⁵⁸

Perhaps Emerson was being kind when he told Sampson Reed in 1842, regarding Swedenborg, "I commend him as a grand poet." Here, as has been the tendency of this essay, Emerson seems to be evaluating Swedenborg's value as a mystic by his accomplishment as a poet. Thus, it appears that the mystic must be more than a seer, or a receiver of the true word of God (as was Swedenborg's claim), but must be poet as well. His work, teaching, and influence will be forgotten if the poetic skill is lacking. Emerson sums up Swedenborg with this very telling passage:

Be it as it may, [Swedenborg's] books have no melody, no emotion, no humour, no relief to the dead prosaic level. In his profuse and accurate imagery is no pleasure, for there is no beauty. We wander forlorn in a lackluster landscape. No bird ever sung in all these gardens of the dead. The entire want of poetry in so transcendent a mind betokens the disease, and like a hoarse voice in a beautiful person is a kind of warning. I think sometimes, he will be read no longer. His great name will turn a sentence. His books have become a monument. His laurel so largely mixed with cypress, a charnel breath so mingles with the temple-incense, that boys and maids will shun the spot.⁵⁹

Perhaps because Swedenborg's visions were so intense and so widely publicized, for Emerson his poetic skill could never rise to a sufficient level to communicate his prophecies. Emerson had begun a fascination with Swedenborg, unknowingly, in 1821, an interest of such quality as to

almost qualify as discipleship. Emerson seemed to have wanted to *believe* in no one man more than he did Emanuel Swedenborg. The portrait created by Emerson here bears a personal scar.

The artist Emerson chose to represent the poet in his *Representative Men* lectures was not encumbered with the burden of religious prophecy; in fact, he lived much closer to the ground than any writer of his day, and it is in part this quality that Emerson recognizes in Shakespeare, his representative poet. Early in the essay Emerson defines the poet in these terms:

A poet is no rattle-brain saying what comes uppermost, and, because he says everything, saying, at last, something good; but a heart in unison with his time and country. There is nothing whimsical and fantastic in his production, but sweet and sad earnest, freighted with the weightiest convictions and pointed with the most determined aim which any man or class knows of in his times.⁶⁰

With this definition Emerson emphasizes social and political context in consideration of a poet's work; he also distances the poet from the "whimsical and fantastic," the trap of the mystic. So it seems, again, that Emerson is defining the poet while at the same time deflating the mystic.

Indeed, Emerson's consideration of Shakespeare is determined in large part by the ability of the poet to absorb his environment and bend it to his own genius; the poet is better an astute observer than an original versifier: "Great genial power, one would almost say, consists in not being original at all; in being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind."⁶¹

This is the genius of Shakespeare: "Shakspeare knew that tradition supplies a better fable than any invention can."⁶² The world was made for Shakspeare to reinvent: tradition and contemporary conditions supply the content, while the genius of the poet is the ability to reform this level of appearance into everlasting truth:

The poet needs a ground in popular tradition on which he may work, and which, again, may restrain his art within the due temperance. It holds him to the people, supplies a foundation for his edifice, and in furnishing so much work done to his hand, leaves him at leisure, and in full strength for the audacities of his imagination.⁶³

This, in Emerson's estimation, is not a condemnation of originality nor a plea for the writer to hang his art on the superficial. Emerson is casting his definition in opposition to the mystic; the "fantastic" of the mystic's imagination exists in the mystic's mind alone, and his ability (or inability) to communicate these revelations determines the value of his work. When Emerson refers to the imagination or the invention of the poet, he intends that the poet's work is grounded in the real world of experience, and contains the flavor of human experience, wherever it occurs to him. So the poet is a great borrower of images, sensations, and the language of real men; this is especially true, writes Emerson, of the poet writing in a time when "there was no literature for the million. The universal reading, the cheap press, were unknown.":

A great poet who appears in illiterate times, absorbs into his sphere all the light which is anywhere radiating. Every intellectual jewel, every flower of sentiment, it is his fine office to bring to the people; and he comes to value his memory, equally with his invention. He is therefore little solicitous whence his thoughts have been derived, whether through translation, whether through tradition, whether by travel in distant countries, whether by inspiration: from whatever source, they are equally welcome to his uncritical audience. Nay, he borrows very near home. Other men say wise things as well as he; only they say a good many foolish things, and do not know when they have spoken wisely. He knows the sparkle of the true stone, and puts it in high place, wherever he finds it.⁶⁴

The poet writes what he knows, and he writes for an audience; the true poet writes for an immediate and an eternal audience, and his truths will answer, but also outlast, contemporary values. As Emerson writes of Homer, Chaucer, and Saadi, "all wit was their wit."⁶⁵ Emerson suggests that, upon borrowing from the times and people of his own era, the poet is thus rooted to his own times and, his skill permitting, is able to transmute his times into all times, his wit into

all wit. Also, there is an implication that, in the final analysis, there is an essential, recognizable truth that transcends time and condition. This essential truth is seen by the true poet, who has the gift of clear vision, perception, and insight. This has been part of Emerson's philosophy since *Nature*; however, it is in that work, rather than his aesthetic writings, that he comes closest to asserting by what qualities this truth is determined. And, appropriately enough, this truth lies behind the veil of external nature, of external images, and is approached through specifically *undetermined* symbols by the poet. It seems there is a paradox at work here, but Emerson's aesthetic rests on the assumption that truth is indeterminate, that it is inexpressible through conventional language. This, as has been seen, is the value of Emerson's paradoxical phrasing. The indeterminate quality of truth is a determination of truth; the path of logic, or of rationale, closes back on itself, not complete, but in the upward spiral Emerson envisioned.

This upward spiraling has applications for the poet in a more practical sense as well. Emerson writes:

It has come to be practically a sort of rule in literature, that a man having once shown himself capable of original writing, is entitled thenceforth to steal from the writings of others at discretion. Thought is the property of him who can entertain it; and of him who can adequately place it. A certain awkwardness [sic] marks the use of borrowed thoughts; but as soon as we have learned what to do with them, they become our own.

Thus all originality is relative. Every thinker is retrospective.⁶⁶

How true this is of Shakespeare, as well as of Emerson himself. Every thinker answers to his predecessors; every poet answers, and echoes, other poets of the past. Through this recognition, the upward spiral is evident:

The finest poetry was first experience: but the thought has suffered a transformation since it was an experience. Cultivated men often attain a good degree of skill in writing verses, but it is easy to read through their poems their personal history: any one acquainted with

parties, can name every figure: this is Andrew, and that is Rachel. The sense thus remains prosaic. It is a caterpillar with wings, and not yet a butterfly. In the poet's mind, the fact has gone over into the new element of thought, and has lost all that is exuvial. This generosity abides with Shakspeare. We say, from the truth and closeness of his pictures, that he knows the lesson by heart. Yet there is not a trace of egotism.⁶⁷

Thus the pattern moves from experience to language, from prosaic language into a new element of thought, which is the poet's realm. The difference between prosaic language and poetic is a difference not of degree but of kind. Shakespeare shares this ability with Homer, Dante, and Chaucer, and according to Emerson, had he been less he might have reached "only the common measure of great authors, of Bacon, Milton, Tasso, Cervantes," where his work might be left "in the twilight of human fate."⁶⁸ But Shakespeare was a "man of men,"

who gave to the science of mind a new and larger subject than had ever existed and planted the standard of humanity some furlongs forward into Chaos, - - that he should not be wise for himself, - - it must even go into the world's history, that the best poet led an obscure and profane life, using his genius for the public amusement.⁶⁹

The last clause of this passage is the only recrimination, albeit a half-hearted one, of Shakespeare. By contrast with Emerson's denouncement of Swedenborg, this slight condemnation of Shakespeare seems trivial. But Emerson portrays here *representative*, not ideal, men; and he realized that, as the upward spiral determines, there will be another poet:

The world still wants its poet-priest, a reconciler who shall not trifle, with Shakspeare the player, nor shall grope in the graves, with Swedenborg the mourner, but who shall see, speak, and act, with equal inspiration. For knowledge will brighten the sunshine; right is more beautiful than private affection, and love is compatible with universal wisdom.⁷⁰

This statement is no condemnation of Shakespeare, but an declaration of optimism for the (inevitable) future "representative" poet; the passage also serves to allow Emerson one more broadside into the already sinking Swedenborg.

In “Poetry and the Imagination,” published in 1874, Emerson describes the poet as a form of representative man, but does so with a bit less personal subtext:

Of course, when we describe man as poet, and credit him with the triumphs of the art, we speak of the potential or ideal man, - - not found now in any one person. You must go through a city or a nation, and find one faculty here, one there, to build the true poet withal. Yet all men know the portrait when it is drawn, and it is part of religion to believe its possible incarnation.

He is the healthy, the wise, the fundamental, the manly man, seer of the secret; against all appearances he sees and reports the truth, namely that the soul generates matter. And poetry is the only verity, - - the expression of a sound mind speaking after the ideal, and not after the apparent.⁷¹

The poet Emerson describes here is ideal, not real; Shakespeare comes closest to the ideal, and is thus *representative*. But the true poet is composite; his faculties are found, in part, in every person. Interestingly, Emerson notes that it is a matter of religion - - of faith - - to believe in the incarnation of the ideal poet (or, rationally, of any *ideal*). Constituting the *real* poet as a democratic entity, and positing the *ideal* as a matter of faith suggests that Emerson’s faith is in the possibilities of communal expression and recognition: that “all men know the portrait when it is drawn.” The true poet, again, has that special clarity of vision; he is “the seer of the secret,” seeing and reporting the only truth: poetry as the “mind speaking after the ideal.” Lest this passage casts Emerson too far in the field of idealism, he qualifies this idealism by noting that “as a power it is the perception of the symbolic character of things, and the treating them as representative.”⁷² So it seems the ideal is, in a sense, attainable after all, through symbolic representation. Still, this is re/presentation, but the symbolic serves as a conduit to the “secret” seen by the poet: “Nature is the true idealist.”⁷³ Again, as he has held before, the symbol is the conduit to the truth. Vivian Hopkins notes that, for Emerson,

the symbol represents the result of that creative process by which the poet has participated in the flowing action of nature; if it is well wrought, it will produce the same immediate effect of spiritual elation which the objects of nature inspire. It is thus a point of contact between man and the material world.⁷⁴

This “point of contact” is not a spatial determination, but a spiritual one. This idea also carries aesthetic implications concerning Emerson’s symbolism.

“Poetry and Imagination” reaffirms much of Emerson’s previous determination about the nature of the poet and the conditions of his work, but more fully develops aesthetic considerations, as well as returning the poet’s work more overtly to the spiritual realm:

In poetry we say we require the miracle. The bee flies among the flowers, and gets mint and marjoram, and generates a new product, which is not mint and marjoram, but honey; the chemist mixes hydrogen and oxygen to yield a new product, which is not these, but water; and the poet listens to conversation and beholds all objects in Nature, to give back, not them, but a new and transcendent whole.⁷⁵

The parallelism of the examples offered by Emerson here, as well as the “transcendent whole,” harkens back to the rhetoric of *Nature*. The poet is concerned here with metamorphosis; Emerson declares that “the reason we set so high a value on any poetry, - - as often on a line or a phrase as on a poem, - - is that it is a new work of Nature”⁷⁶ Poetry is truth, and faith makes this possible; the poet

know[s] that this correspondence of things to thoughts is far deeper than they can penetrate, - - defying adequate expression; that it is elemental, or in the core of things. Veracity therefore is that which we require in poets, - - that they shall say how it was with them, and not what might be said.⁷⁷

Emerson establishes a connection between truth and faith; or, rather, he establishes that faith is required for the poet to perceive truth: “For poetry is faith. To the poet the world is virgin soil; all is practicable; the men are ready for virtue; it is always time to do right. He is a true recommencer, or Adam in the garden again.”⁷⁸ This is the poet as the “seer of the secret,” seeing

the world as new, unnamed, undetermined, and this condition of the world to the poet's eye allows for the "miracle" of creation to take place:

American life storms about us daily, and is slow to find a tongue. This contemporary insight is transubstantiation, the conversion of daily bread into the holiest symbols; and every man would be a poet if his intellectual digestion were perfect. The test of the poet is the power to take the passing day, with its news, its cares, its fears, as he shares them, and hold it up to divine reason, till he sees it to have a purpose and beauty, and to be related to astronomy and history and the eternal order of the world. Then the dry twig blossoms in his hand.⁷⁹

The language Emerson chooses for this passage is interesting in that he comments, in a fashion, on his own history. "Transubstantiation" is certainly an appropriate term for the phenomena Emerson is describing, but it seems an almost ironic comment on his initial reason for leaving the Unitarian pulpit forty-two years earlier. Also, however, the term again reinforces the connection of the poet's work to the act of creation, or miracle; this implication rests on the assumption, which I believe is substantiated by Emerson's work, that all acts of creation are spiritual in nature. Indeed, the blossoming of the dry twig in this passage suggests bringing, or resurrecting, life from death.

In *Representative Men* Emerson regards the poet's power as like the power of nature, "who lifts the land into mountain slopes without effort, and by the same rule as she floats a bubble into the air, and likes as well to do one as the other."⁸⁰ This ability, which Emerson attributes to Shakespeare, "makes that equality of power in farce, tragedy, narrative, and lovesongs; a merit so incessant, that each reader is incredulous of the perception of other readers."⁸¹ He continues:

Things were mirrored in his poetry without loss or blur; he could paint the fine with precision, the great with compass; the tragic and the comic indifferently, and without any distortion or favour. He carried his powerful execution into minute details to a hair point; and yet these, like nature's, will bear the scrutiny of the solar microscope. In short, he is

the chief example to prove that more or less of production, more or fewer pictures is a thing indifferent. He had the power to make one picture.⁸²

It is this power of Shakespeare's that, according to Emerson, makes him "the type of the poet, and has added a new problem to metaphysics. This is that which throws him into natural history as a main production of the globe, and as announcing new eras and ameliorations."⁸³ Emerson's language is significant to his aesthetic: Shakespeare defines not only the type of the poet, but also establishes the poet as a *type*, as a separate, unique production of nature. Emerson suggests that Shakespeare's genius is his creation, with equal power, of characters who are *real*, "as if they were people who had lived under his roof."⁸⁴ Perfect representation of nature through language is little short of miraculous indeed.

Moreover, Emerson is himself prophetic in this estimation of Shakespeare's powers of representation. Shakespeare had the "power to make one picture":

Daguerre learned how to let one flower etch its image on his plate of iodine; and then proceeds at leisure to etch a million. There are always objects; but there was never representation. Here is perfect representation, at last, and now let the world of figures sit for their portraits. No recipe can be given for the making of a Shakspeare; but the possibility of the translation of things into song, is demonstrated.⁸⁵

Emerson, in choosing the Daguerreotype as an example of perfect representation, has equated the visual image with the symbolic imagery of language. One key term here is *translation*; Shakespeare's ability to compose *real* characters as opposed to figural ones is elevated to the ability of the photograph to create a *real* image of the world. The other key term Emerson uses is *possibility*; the "possibility of the translation of things into song," or of the world into another representative media "without loss or blur," allows Emerson the by-product of a *visual* aesthetic, or at least the groundwork for an representational aesthetic which circumvents the inherent

instabilities of language. This visual aesthetic will reverberate with great significance into the twentieth century.

Notes

1. Elisa New, *The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 27.
2. Ibid., 27-28.
3. Ibid., 40.
4. Ibid., 43.
5. Bliss Perry, *Emerson Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931), 84-85.
6. Richard Lee Francis, "The Poet and Experience," in *Emerson Centenary Essays*. Ed Joel Myerson (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 94.
7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume III: Essays: Second Series*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 1.
8. Ibid., 2.
9. Quoted in Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1885), 129.
10. Emerson, "The Poet," 22.
11. Joseph Slater, "Historical Introduction," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume III: Essays: Second Series*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), xl.
12. Ibid., 5.
13. Ibid., 3.
14. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 179.
15. Emerson, "The Poet," 11.
16. Ibid., 14-15.
17. Ibid., 15.
18. Ibid., 13.

19. Vivian C. Hopkins, *Spires of Form: A Study of Emerson's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 121.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 12.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 20.
27. Ibid.
28. Perry, 59.
29. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: 1822 - 1826*. Ed. William H. Gilman, Alfred R. Ferguson, Merrell R. Davis (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 224.
30. Emerson, "The Poet," 22.
31. Ibid, 3.
32. Ibid., 3-4.
33. Ibid., 17.
34. Ibid., 18.
35. Ibid., 5.
36. Ibid., 12.
37. Ibid., 20.
38. Ibid., 20.
39. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 68.

40. Perry, 72.
41. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Swedenborg; or, the Mystic," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume IV: Representative Men: Seven Lectures*. Ed. Douglas Emory Wilson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 53-54.
42. Ibid., 54.
43. Ibid., 57-58.
44. Ibid., 59.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 63.
47. Quoted in Emerson, "Swedenborg; or the Mystic," 65.
48. Emerson, "Swedenborg; or the Mystic," 67-68.
49. Ibid., 68.
50. Ibid., 69.
51. Ibid., 73.
52. Ibid., 73.
53. Ibid., 73-74.
54. Ibid., 74.
55. Ibid., 75.
56. Ibid., 79.
57. Perry, 59-60.
58. Emerson, "Swedenborg; or, the Mystic," 80.
59. Ibid., 81.
60. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Shakspeare; or the Poet," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume IV: Representative Men: Seven Lectures*. Ed. Douglas Emory Wilson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 109.
61. Ibid., 110.

62. Ibid., 113.
63. Ibid., 111.
64. Ibid., 113.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., 114.
67. Ibid., 123.
68. Ibid., 124.
69. Ibid., 124-25.
70. Ibid., 125.
71. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Centenary Edition Volume VIII: Letters and Social Aims*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), 26-27.
72. Ibid., 27.
73. Ibid., 26.
74. Hopkins, 133.
75. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 16-17.
76. Ibid., 40
77. Ibid., 29-30.
78. Ibid., 31.
79. Ibid., 35.
80. Emerson, "Shakspeare; or, the Poet," 122.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 121.

85. Ibid., 122.

Chapter 6

The “Poetry of Things”: Motion Pictures

Emerson’s theories of poetics concern the nature and role of the poet, and his interest is in determining an aesthetic for eternal, not a superficial or timely form; this fact allows his theories to resist limitation to a specific era in literary history. Emerson’s theoretical work does, of course, change with the academic climate of the day, but the nature of the theory - - and the aesthetic properties Emerson derived - - are not only a part of literary history, but, in the nature of their search for eternal truths, transcend historical conditions. Indeed, Emerson’s work has wavered in and out of fashion given the cultural proclivities of the times. However, because of the fundamental purpose of his work, along with the essential nature of the eye in his theory, Emerson’s aesthetic work has unique application in the predominant art form of the modern era: the motion picture. Béla Balázs, in *Theory of the Film* (1952), echoes Emerson in his critique of film theory:

One of the aims of this book is precisely to prove that the deeply rooted old conceptions and valuations of an artistic culture nurtured on the old arts was the greatest obstacle to the development of film art in Europe. It was the old principles, inapplicable to a new art, which smothered new principles at birth. . . . The traditional arts which have proved themselves by the momentum of a millennium of practice have less need of theoretical support than have those which have barely appeared above the horizon of the present.¹

Emerson, in “The American Scholar,” criticized oppressive European models for stifling the creation of a distinctly American literature; similarly, but in a different context, Balázs condemns the weight of cultural tradition for subduing a serious theoretical consideration of film.

Emerson’s requirements for the poet - - that he should be of clear sight and perception, a man speaking to men, and a producer of original symbols realized from the point of contact between

man and nature - - seems capable of extension, in the twentieth century, to the filmmaker-as-poet. Balázs' observation above declares for film in 1952 essentially what Emerson declared for American literature in 1838. The aesthetic Emerson determines for poetry extends very naturally into the media of cinema, with certain qualifications. Emerson's poet was restricted to the material of language for the actuation of craft. Film circumvents the intrusion of the word between experience and perception of that experience, a quality Emerson would have approved of (as demonstrated by his statement regarding the Daguerreotype suggests). Still, I do not intend to claim that Emerson's poet is today's filmmaker, or that Emerson's poetic theory holds true for film without restriction. Many considerations must be taken into account in dealing with the two separate media, especially two which deal with different material as their basis for expression. Film is primarily visual, and only by the occasion of its subject is it narrative, or even verbal. Emerson's emphasis on sight, the model and function of the eye, and the importance of the image allow a firm starting ground for an investigation of this sort.

If Sampson Reed gave Emerson in 1821 his "first impulse" toward a literary career, it was also Sampson Reed who opened the aesthetic possibilities of language and vision - - albeit in the form of Swedenborgian revelation - - in Emerson, possibilities he would explore more fully on his own as he grew further and further away from orthodoxy. And, consequently, the further he moved away from orthodoxy toward a revaluation of poetry, the more he moved toward an aesthetic which contained the possibility of circumventing language. That is, Emerson's poet utilizes language as his material means of relating the fact of his experiences; but Emerson's definition of the poet himself, or, of the poet as a creator of symbolic representation, extends the possibilities of poetry as representation to the filmmaker as poet, capable of the "perfect representation"

Emerson attributed to Shakespeare and noticed in Daguerre. Emerson died in April of 1882, thirteen years before the Lumière brothers completed their first motion picture camera in France in March 1895. However, the survival of Romanticism in American letters, as well as the action and possibilities of the camera itself (and thus the filmmaker) reaffirm Emerson's idealized poetic theory in a practical sense.

In Samson Reed's "Oration on Genius," Emerson's first exposure to Reed and, indirectly, Swedenborg, Reed introduces the idea of organic form as a determinant for realizing divine presence in the world. Art has divine potential only when joined with intuition and a "recognition of harmony within itself." Also, the "Oration" emphasizes in the individual the significance of individual perception and insight. These qualities, present in Emerson's work from that point forward, contribute wholly to his ever-emerging visual sense. Reed's emphasis, however, is on the Word. Emanuel Swedenborg, Reed believed, was chosen by God to reveal His presence in the world, and to make this known through the word of the Holy Scriptures. Swedenborg's visions were, apparently, motivated by Scriptural precedent - - thus the significance of the Word in Reed's work. For Reed, the Word contained the thing: God's will descends to earth, "makes a language out of nature," and this "natural language" is revealed through the verbal language of the Scriptures; Reed makes no distinction between the Word as thing and the Word as a *representation* of the thing. Representation through language is necessary because of the Fall, but this does not lessen the significance of the Word in the divine, or revealed, sense. However, it is the human condition that "the intellectual eye of man is formed to see the light, not to make it," as Reed declares in the "Oration." "The light" for Reed signifies truth. Reed utilizes the figurative sense of *eye* and *light* to communicate ideas about perception and truth; but this ongoing

utilization of visual reference, as well as the connections, however figurative, between sight and truth must have had a profound impact on the young Emerson's thinking. And, certainly after his eye disease and temporary blindness in 1825, Emerson would reformulate the figurative uses of Reed's terms into more literal usage. This important step in the evolution of Emerson's philosophy is crucial to his later determination of the Poet's significance. Though Emerson eventually severed ties with Reed, the New Jerusalem Church, Unitarianism, the Transcendentalism Movement (such as it was), and any sense of orthodoxy, he never surrendered the centrality of the healthy eye and the intuition of the poet; these elements had become crystalized in his thinking.

Emerson's journal entries between 1821 and 1825, as has been noted, began to take on an attitude of visual awareness that increase with time in frequency and utility. Emerson begins not only to use the eye as a symbol for perception and awareness, but also to grant the agency of sight in an aesthetic sense - - that is to say, for the purpose of recognizing beauty and harmony for its own sake - - to the eye, and the mind of the observer. While in 1822 he notes that exhibitions of the "Omnipotence of God" are blind but to the "purged eye," in 1823 he comments on the plasticity of the mind, commenting that

with a wanton variety which tires of sameness [my mind] throws all its thoughts into innumerable lights and changes the fantastic scene by varying its own operation upon it; by combining & separating, by comparing & judging, by remembering and inventing all things. Every one of these little changes within, produces a pleasure; the pleasure or power of sight. . . . It is a ticket of admission to another world of ineffable grandeur - - to unknown orders of things which are as *real* as they are stupendous.²

Emerson has taken a larger aesthetic step by recognizing the action of the mind upon what the eye perceives, in terms of variations in lighting and composition, editing, repetition, and, significantly,

the fact of the reality of this world of images. No doubt Emerson, in his walks around Concord, had many times witnessed the affect of light and shadow on the landscape and buildings; certainly he demonstrates here a recognition of the power implied by composition and editing, by “combining & separating, comparing & judging,” and the pleasure this activity of the mind evokes. Later this will significantly inform the agency of the Poet. Here, however, in 1823 Emerson, while considering the divinity of nature, realizes this quality and expresses it in terms that would be familiar to the painter, photographer, or filmmaker. And, perhaps more significantly, he realizes that these images, this “fantastic scene” with elements changed only by the action of a mind which “tires of sameness,” this scene is *real* (the emphasis is Emerson’s). In other words, Emerson imagines a scene created by his own eye for composition, and realizes both an intuitive sense of pleasure, as well as the conviction of the reality of the scene, which exists only in his mind. Thus we seem to be dealing with two ‘realities’: one that exists in nature, as originally observed; and another, which the observer’s mind has changed by “throwing innumerable lights” upon the scene and changing it by acting upon it. Emerson writes in his essay “Intellect”:

If you gather apples in the sunshine , or make hay, or hoe corn, and then retire within doors, and shut your eyes, and press them with your hand, you shall still see apples hanging in the bright light, with boughs and leaves thereto, or the tasselled grass, or the corn-flags, and this for five or six hours afterwards. There lie the impressions on the retentive organ, though you knew it not. So lies the whole series of natural images with which your life has made you acquainted, in your memory, though you know it not, and a thrill of passion flashes light on their dark chamber, and the active power seizes instantly the fit image, as the word of its momentary thought.³

Emerson is describing the neurological phenomenon that make motion pictures possible, persistence of vision. Emerson declares that the image of immediate experience is retained, but

also that the images are retained by memory; each “natural image” has equal validity, or equal verity, for Emerson. Is he offering a twofold sort of visual thinking that will allow for two different scenes to be determined as equally ‘real’? André Bazin comments on this phenomenon in cinema: “The fantastic in the cinema is possible only because of the irresistible realism of the photographic image. It is the image that can bring us face to face with the unreal, that can introduce the unreal into the world of the visible.”⁴ Of course, Emerson is not writing about cinema, photography, or painting. But the process by which he experiences “the pleasure of power, or of sight” is, I believe, similar to an aesthetic possible in film that renders the world of images as real, or at least as real as the *apparent* world. And, in this sense, Emerson is not so far removed from Swedenborg, who believed that the material world was phenomenal and superficial, and that the spiritual world was real. In describing his experience, Emerson anticipates an aesthetic that is applicable in his own time, regarding the role of the imagination and in the perceptive abilities of the poet, but will be as applicable almost one hundred years later through the physical agency of the camera and the mind of the filmmaker.

By 1836 Emerson had been thinking and writing in visual terms to describe spiritual experiences and insights. Most often, before the publication of *Nature*, he had used visual terminology in a figurative sense, or had used visual metaphors to describe moments of deep perception. With the publication of *Nature*, however, Emerson established a new condition of spirituality through visual perception. This is certainly true of the book’s style: the figurative and metaphorical uses of visual imagery are more complicated and take on a more formal quality in the sense that his use of visual imagery begins to aggregate into an aesthetic of its own. *Nature* established for Emerson a unique and personal style of expression; he had begun the process by

which he would circumvent his anxiety about “finding his place” by *making* his own place (though this would take several years and produce anxieties of its own). The more sustained unity of the visual apparatus Emerson utilizes is a significant part of his unique poetic / prose style, and one fitted perfectly to the ends of what would become the Transcendental Movement.

By revisiting a few passages of *Nature* previously discussed it is possible to see how Emerson’s thinking anticipates a uniquely visual, if not cinematic, aesthetic. In the six line poem which introduces the text, the second couplet has particular significance:

The eye reads omens where it goes,
And speaks all languages the rose;

The “eye” that reads omens is reading symbols; the poet’s eye will recognize these symbols, recognize their universal application, and the poet will “speak” this language of nature, the language of the rose. However, the significance of this couplet is in an alternate, but equally true, application: Emerson communicates his thoughts about the poet’s eye and nature’s eternal forms, but the couplet may be read also as determining an *eye that can read and speak*. In the original couplet Emerson implies that the eye has the capacity to “speak.” And, the language determined by this passage is particularly visual: the “omens” recognized are certainly visual, and the eye recognizes this visual “language.” I do not believe that Emerson, at this point, is making a determination regarding nature as a specific language of forms, or of nature having any kind of linguistic structure. I believe Emerson is using the term “language” in a figurative sense, and this usage serves the purpose of the couplet’s describing the poet’s job of recognizing forms in nature and translating these forms into verbal language, a transformation of visual symbols experienced by the naturalist into verbal ones which may be shared. However, the term “speaks” may mean to

verbalize as well as to recognize; perhaps the eye has the ability to understand “all languages the rose” and, in this sense of understanding, gain intuitive truths about nature. This interpretation places the possibility of recognition of visual forms in the eye, which seeks them out, by reading omens “where it goes.” Emerson, certainly, could not have been thinking about any mechanical means of reproducing images here; but the thinking demonstrated by this couplet indicates a condition of seeing the world that Emerson possessed, and that would anticipate a visual aesthetic, attenuated to the material world and capable of reproducing perfect representations of that world through mechanical means. Emerson does not specifically create photographic aesthetics; to make, or even imply, such a claim would be absurd. He is not attempting to determine a specific visual aesthetic here; there is no sense of his trying to justify the ways of God to man, for instance. Rather, he is trying to articulate a sense of how man and God reveal themselves in each other, and in the world. His thinking is innately visual, and this attitude was certainly heightened by his traumatic eye condition of 1825. As he writes in “Beauty,” “such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye, that the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves*; a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, grouping” (again, the emphasis is Emerson’s).⁵ His condition of seeing the world, recognizing its forms, and placing the agency of the eye central to his philosophy of the poet maintains a sense of visual thinking and writing he would continue to develop, and which would pass in his legacy through to the age of mechanical reproduction.

The “transparent eye-ball” passage of *Nature*, while it may seem to be of great visual significance, is in actuality an unrealizable image, verbally or visually. Emerson is describing a moment of epiphany; the chief significance of it in this study is that he chooses to do so through

the symbol of a transparent eye, which reflects his emphasis of visual symbolization. This especially is a passage which resists filmic interpretation because of the terms of its significance: the epiphany described here is a moment in which ego is suppressed; hence, there is no perspective from which to view this “scene,” as it were. Emerson does enclose the passage within a frame of figurative statements that allow the terms of the passage to communicate the potentially incommunicable experience. The frame itself is a fundamental aspect of its understanding, which is also true of the cinema; the significance of this framing will be observed in more detail later. Here, however, perhaps the most overt visual symbol in *Nature* contributes nothing to a specific visual aesthetic, and an attempt to extrapolate such would be to stretch the passage beyond its logical bounds (in the sense of its meaning).

Another previously examined passage from *Nature* deserves a fresh look in terms of visual aesthetics:

This [pleasure from nature] seems partly owing to the eye itself. The eye is the best of artists. By mutual action of its structure and of the laws of light, perspective is produced, which integrates every mass of objects, of what character soever, into a well colored and shaded globe, so that where the particular objects are mean and unaffecting, the landscape which they compose, is round and symmetrical. And as the eye is the best of composers, so light is the first of painters.⁶

Emerson introduces the ideas of perspective (and, by logical extension, point of view), composition (or perhaps *mise-en-scène*), lighting, and framing. Also important here is Emerson’s declaration that the image composed by the eye is “round and symmetrical,” or a symbol of the eye itself. This recognition not only helps to determine a sense of *mise-en-scène*, but also emphasizes the eye, rather than the camera, as the active composer. In the model of camera, filmmaker’s eye, and scene, the camera is a passive, rather than active, agent. The composition of

the scene is accomplished in the mind and eye of the filmmaker, and composed to fit the aesthetic requirements of his or her shot. Certainly it is admitted that the process of filmmaking is a plastic one; the scenes are staged, as opposed to the naturally occurring landscapes Emerson describes here and elsewhere in *Nature*. And although Emerson does recognize “the plastic power of the human eye,” it is the mind, the perception of the poet, that achieves the realization of the eye’s power. The “power” in Emerson’s eye is the power of recognition and perception; that is, the eye recognizes form (or, “speaks all languages the rose”) but does not shape or create it. Still, Emerson’s coupling of the terms *power* and *eye* reveals the significance of the visual in his philosophy.

Emerson was a well informed student of painters and painting; he knew and understood visual concepts in art, as has certainly been demonstrated. But, his imagination takes his thoughts about aesthetics out of the frame of the painter and more into the realm of a continual, moving art, such as the one he saw in nature and composed in his mind. It is this quality of Emerson that, at least at this point in his thinking, seems to lead into an anticipation of cinema. Emerson’s imagination would envision a scene, compose elements within it, and move it out of its spatial borders, or the frame of the painter. The distinction between painting and photography (the basis of film), and film itself is determined by Stanley Cavell in a way that has bearing on Emerson’s visual sense:

You can always ask, pointing to an object in a photograph - - a building, say - - what lies behind it, totally obscured by it. This only accidentally makes sense when asked of an object in a painting. You can always ask, of an area photographed, what lies adjacent to that area, beyond the frame. This generally makes no sense asked of a painting. You can ask these questions of objects in photographs because they have answers in reality. The world of a painting is not continuous with the world of its frame: at its frame, a world finds its limits. We might say: A painting *is* a world; a photograph is *of* the world. What happens in a photograph is that *it* comes to an end. A photograph is cropped, not necessarily by a paper cutter or by masking but by the camera itself.⁷

The camera does not create or shape the world in its frame; neither does the poet create the world in his view, in his perception. The creative power of the poet's imagination and "the plastic power of the human eye" determine the composition of objects in a field of view. The camera, as well, accepts a field of view, and the filmmaker determines what is included in this field. The painter may determine a field of view and the elements inside it, but, as Cavell makes clear, the "world" of the painting is finite. Because the camera can *move*, the photographic frame, or world, of the motion picture is infinite, just as the creative power of the poet's mind and the scope of his eye are infinite. Cavell qualifies the point this way:

The fact that in a moving picture successive film frames are fit flush into the fixed screen frame results in a phenomenological frame that is indefinitely extendable and contractible, limited in the smallness of the object it can grasp only by the state of its technology, and in the largeness only by the span of the world. Drawing the camera back, and panning it, are two ways of extending the frame; a close-up is of a part of the body, or of one object or small set of objects, supported by and reverberating the whole frame of nature. The altering frame is the image of perfect attention. Early in its history the camera discovered the possibility of *calling* attention to persons and parts of persons and objects; but it is equally a possibility of the medium not to call attention to them, but, rather, to let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight.⁸

As Emerson stated in *The Divinity School Address*, "faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms;"⁹ he reaffirms this point in "Poetry and Imagination": "Rightly, poetry is organic. We cannot know things by words and writing, but only by taking a central position in the universe and living in its forms."¹⁰ These comments echo the possibility of film Cavell distinguishes. And, in *The American Scholar*, Emerson notes that nature shines, "system on system shooting like rays, upward, downward, without centre, without circumference."¹¹ As the possibilities of the poet's imagination are endless and transcend time in consideration of eternal truth, so too does the film camera contain the capacity for the infinite, in the sense that its borders

are fixed only at specific points in time. And, because film “records” what Emerson refers to as a “perfect reproduction” of the world, it also preserves that reproduction, making it, in a sense, timeless. Motion pictures, though, only *seem* like recordings; but, as Cavell asks, what are they recordings of?

Of course it's not *him* [the live screen actor] on the screen. Nothing is *on* the screen, but, at best, moving light and shadows. It's the performance which is live. - - As contrasted with what? Since the use of sound transcription and videotaping, “live” performances contrast with recorded performances. And it seems that there ought to be this same contrast between what is presented to us on the stage and on the screen. From here it will occur to someone to ask, Then what is a movie a recording of?; to which the answer is apt to be, Nothing. From here, in turn, it may seem to follow that the issue of reality is settled, that movies are “something on their own”; the only thing they *could* be recordings of - - real events happening as they are transcribed on the screen - - have [sic] simply never taken place. Film *can* be used as a sort of recording device, as in newsreels. But the events in a movie are ones we can never be, or can never have been, present at apart from the movie itself.¹²

The camera is the *technology* which makes this possible for the filmmaker, and which makes possible the projection of that world on a fixed frame for communal appreciation. The fixed frame of the film screen, like the frame of the painting, does not move, but the filmed images move *inside* the screen; the motion of the camera relative to the motion of the persons or objects in its field of view accounts for this twofold sense of movement. Thus the filmmaker may reposition, and/or juxtapose, conventional objects from conventional settings or backgrounds, and thus create new visual images, or symbols. For the poet, juxtaposition of symbols creates new symbols, separated from conventional associations; original usage of words, long separated from their origins, may be recombined, re-imagined by the poet to recreate an original relationship between words and things, which Sampson Reed referred to as the “language of things.” The filmmaker has this ability equally, through the verisimilitude of the photographed imaged and

through *mise-en-scène*. Thus, truth - - for Emerson, the search for eternal forms - - becomes a condition of the cinema as well.

Cavell notes that the late nineteenth century was concerned with representations of the ‘real’ world, and suggests that the rise of cinema was inevitable, and timely, in these terms:

it is certainly relevant that the burning issue during the latter half of the nineteenth century, in painting and in the novel and in the theater, was realism. And unless film captured possibilities opened up by the arts themselves, it is hard to imagine that its possibilities as an artistic medium would have shown up as, and as suddenly as, they did.

The idea and wish for the world re-created in its own image was satisfied *at last* by cinema. Bazin calls this the myth of total cinema. But it had always been one of the myths of art; each of the arts had satisfied it in its own way. The mirror was in various hands held up to nature.¹³

Bazin considers this condition in terms of painting and the plastic arts in the Western world:

The quarrel over realism in art stems from a misunderstanding, from a confusion between the aesthetic and the psychological; between true realism, the need that is to give significant expression to the world both concretely and its essence, and the pseudorealism of a deception aimed at fooling the eye (or for that matter the mind); a pseudorealism content in other words with illusory appearances. That is why medieval art never passed through this crisis; simultaneously vividly realistic and highly spiritual, it knew nothing of the drama that came to light as a consequence of technical developments. Perspective was the original sin of Western painting.

It was redeemed by Niepce and Lumière. In achieving the aims of baroque art, photography has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness. Painting was forced, as it turned out, to offer us illusion and this illusion was reckoned sufficient unto art. Photography and the cinema on the other had are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism.¹⁴

Veracity was also a concern for Emerson, regarding the poet. In the “Imagination” section of his essay “Poetry and Imagination,” he writes:

Whilst common sense looks at things or visible Nature as real and final facts, poetry, or the imagination which dictates it, is a second sight, looking through these, and using them as types or words for thoughts which they signify. Or is this belief a metaphysical whim of modern times, and quite too refined? On the contrary, it is as old as the human mind. . . .

the world exists for thought: it is to make appear things which hide: mountains, crystals, plants, animals, are seen; that which makes them is not seen: these, then, are “apparent copies of unapparent natures.”¹⁵

And later, in the section titled “Veracity,” Emerson writes that

[the poet] know[s] that this correspondence of things to thoughts is far deeper than they can penetrate, - - defying adequate expression; that it is elemental, or in the core of things. Veracity therefore is that which we require in poets, - - that they shall say how it was with them, and not what might be said.

When he sings, the world listens with the assurance that now a secret of God is to be spoken. The right poetic mood is or makes a more complete sensibility, piercing the outward fact to the meaning of the fact; shows a sharper insight: and the perception creates the strong expression of it as the man who sees his way walks in it.¹⁶

According to Bazin, film makes possible that same sense of truth that the poet aspires to; and this is made possible through the technology of the camera. However, it is crucial to remember that the camera is passive; it has no ‘forming power’ of its own. The veracity sought is through the mind and perception of the filmmaker, as it is of the poet. In his regard Emerson quotes William Blake as saying, “I question not my corporeal eye any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look through it, not with it.”¹⁷ Bazin makes a similar claim regarding the condition of the object photographed:

The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction: it *is* the model.¹⁸

The veracity Emerson requires from his poet is twofold: it is the poet’s own sense of conviction about this expression, as well as the true nature of that which is being expressed. Emerson writes that “fancy paints; imagination sculptures.”¹⁹ Fancy is mere versifying; the imagination is the ability of the poet to perceive the eternal in the apparent, and shape new symbols capable of

carrying these truths. Thus, one of Emerson's best known passages may be read as an aesthetic statement:

For it is not meters, but a meter-making argument, that makes a poem, - - a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genius the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune.²⁰

Emerson's statement reverses our conventional expectations about poetry aesthetics, in that we would expect *meters* to be a determinant of a poem's aesthetic value. However, Emerson claims that the poem must *make* its own form, that the "argument" which finds its own unique form *makes* a poem; indeed, this view of a poem's form defines a poem as such. Once again, Emerson has separated aesthetics from the conventional, "orthodox" expectation, and created a new sense of organic values for the aesthetics of poetry.

The invention of the motion picture camera in 1895 corresponded to the naturalism and psychological realism prevalent in American literature. At the time when American writers were exploring the truths of the mind and the condition of humans related to environment - - writers such as Crane, Dreiser, James, Wharton, Whitman, Dos Passos - - the medium of photography gave over to the motion picture the unique power of *verisimilitude*. Emerson writes in *Nature*:

When we speak of nature . . . we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet.²¹

And, in "Poetry and Imagination," he writes that "poetry, if perfected, is the only verity; it is the speech of man after the real, and not after the apparent."²² The poet has the dual role of unifying the disparate elements of the apparent world into coherent symbols without changing the essence of those elements, as well as the need to speak "after the real" in "the speech of man."

Similarly, Cavell writes of the filmmaker:

Good directors know how to mean everything they do. Great directors mean more - - more completely, more subtly, more specifically - - and they discover how to do everything they mean. The gestures of bad directors are empty - - they speak, as it were, nonsense. The implication of this theme is the absolute responsibility of the artist for the actions and the assertions in his work. It is an instance of the human being's absolute responsibility for the intentions and consequences of his actions, and a kind of solace for it. (The human condemnation to intention and consequence is the sequel, if not the meaning, of original sin.) My impatience with the idea that photographs and paintings never really project or represent reality (when, that is, they obviously do) expresses my sense that, as elsewhere, a fake skepticism is being used to deny that human responsibility.²³

Thus Cavell asserts that the image projected in a motion picture is *real*, and is a kind of truth, the same kind of truth that Emerson requires of his poet. Moreover, this sense of reality, or truthfulness, has a kind of moral requirement attached to it. This seems perfectly consistent with Emerson's insistence that only "a life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text,"²⁴ and that "the corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language."²⁵ Emerson makes this point most clearly in *Nature*:

The ruin or blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand, as perception. Indeed, neither can be perfect without the other.²⁶

As has already been demonstrated, Emerson's poet must have clarity of vision: both physical vision and vision in terms of insight, or "second sight"; and connected to truth for Emerson is the

quality of beauty. In Emerson's thinking, the world is not *made* beautiful by the poet or artist, but is itself beauty. When, in *Nature*, Emerson states his preliminary thesis as such: "... nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?"²⁷ he seems to answer this, at least in part, in the chapter on "Beauty":

The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty. Extend this element to the uttermost, and I call it an ultimate end. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All.²⁸

For Emerson, the question of beauty in nature is not an aesthetic one, but one of moral sentiment, and is aligned with truth in that, in Emerson's world, there is no evil, but only a deprivation of good. The difference between good and evil is a matter not of the world, but of the individual mind perceiving the world. He makes this point clear in "Uses of Great Men":

The possibility of interpretation lies in the identity of the observer with the observed. Each material thing has its celestial side; has its translation through humanity into the spiritual and necessary sphere, where it plays a part as indestructible as any other. And to these their ends all things continually ascend.²⁹

Emerson also affirms this position in "The Poet": "Since everything in nature answers to a moral power, if any phenomenon remains brute and dark, it is because the corresponding faculty in the observer is not yet active."³⁰ Emerson solidifies his connection between truth and beauty in the chapter titled "Idealism" from *Nature*:

Whilst thus the poet delights us by animating nature like a creator, with his own thoughts, he differs from the philosopher only herein, that the one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth. But, the philosopher, not less than the poet, postpones the apparent order and relations of things to the empire of thought. "The problem of philosophy," according to Plato, "is, for all that exists conditionally, to find a ground unconditioned and absolute." It proceeds on the faith that a law determines all phenomena, which being known, the phenomena can be predicted. That law, when in the mind, is an idea. Its beauty is infinite.

The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both.³¹

Thus Emerson has solved the “problem of philosophy” in this regard by unconditionally grounding truth and beauty as absolute qualities of the universe. These qualities take form in the poet’s mind, and according to the poet’s clarity of sight. Not only does the equation of truth and beauty state a moral imperative for Emerson, but also contains an aesthetic condition; namely, that truth exists eternally but is realized by the individual, in the mind of the poet, or the filmmaker. In composing works of art, the artist must decide what is to be kept and what is to be discarded, what material is relevant for the artist’s expression, and in what order that material is to be composed; this is a necessary function of art, whether film or poetry. The poet, or the filmmaker, is an individual artist, one who shapes a unique vision in the imagination. That film is a collaborative enterprise is not to be denied, but the unified vision, the clarity of expression that transcends the medium of film and becomes a statement of truth, is the vision of an individual will. And this artist, poet or filmmaker, is such a gift to his culture, and to all culture, that Emerson cannot restrain his passion concerning his coming into the world:

All that we call sacred history attests that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology. Man, never so often deceived, still watches for the arrival of a brother who can hold him steady to a truth, until he has made it his own. With what joy I begin to read a poem, which I confide in, as an inspiration! And now my chains are to be broken; I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs in which I live, - - opaque, though they seem transparent, - - and from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations.³²

Emerson is truly democratic, as he describes himself in the same condition as all humans in spite of his work: “For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.”³³

The filmmaker has as his material the facts of the world, as opposed to the language of the world. The poet represents the world through the medium, or the mediation, of language; if the poet is true, his language will be 'transparent' to the receptive soul, or will make all souls receptive to his influence. Thus it seems that the poet is in the condition of freeing himself from the mediation of language, that language is a barrier to be worked through, or traced backward to its origin, until it is no longer *word* but *thing*. Language that is "orthodox," according to Emerson, is opaque and of the apparent, not the spiritual, world. The filmmaker, on the other hand, does not suffer this barrier, but is free to work with the material of the world; still, however, he is bound to the same conditions of seeing, the same necessity of composition and clear expression of truth as is the poet. Emerson's statement in *Nature* that "the visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world"³⁴ suggests that the *invisible*, the spiritual and eternal, must be inferred intuitively from the limits of the apparent world; indeed, intuition begins at the ends of the material world. This responsibility is the artist's, to utilize his ability and material. In Emerson's thinking, this process is truly democratic, available to everyone. Cavell also asserts this point:

the perception of poetry is as open to all, regardless as it were of birth or talent, as the ability is to hold a camera on a subject, so that a failure so to perceive, to persist in missing the subject, which may amount to missing the evanescence of the subject, is ascribable only to ourselves, to failures of our character; as if to fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things - - that is, to fail the perception that there *is* something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong - - requires that we persistently coarsen and stupify ourselves.³⁵

Cavell's language, his very word choice, sounds particularly Emersonian here; Emerson might make exactly the same proclamation about his poet, and indeed has, in slightly different language. As he writes in *Nature*:

[The] relation between the mind and matter is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God, and so is free to be known by all men. It appears to men, or it does not appear. When in fortunate hours we ponder this miracle, the wise man doubts, if, at all other times, he is not blind and deaf;

- - "Can these things be,
And overcome us like a summer's cloud,
Without a special wonder?"

for the universe becomes transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own, shines through it.³⁶

This is Emerson's democratization of poetry, but more so, the democratization of truth.

Shakespeare may be the *representative* poet, but he stands for all poets, and thus for all men.

Emerson, and those under the rays of his influence, embed this endless potential in all; this is a part of Emerson's foundation as a thinker.

In this sense Cavell asks us to consider Emerson, and Thoreau, as American philosophers:

Emerson and Thoreau are the central founding thinkers of American culture but that this knowledge, though possessed by shifting bands of individuals, is not culturally possessed. It would be an expression of this possibility that no profession is responsible for them as thinkers. Mostly they do not exist for the American profession of philosophy; and the literary professions are mostly not in a position to preserve them in these terms. They are unknown to the culture they express in a way that it would not be thinkable for Kant and Schiller and Goethe to be unknown to the culture of Germany, or Descartes and Rousseau to France, or Locke and Hume and John Stuart Mill to England. I do not think it is clear how we are to understand and assess this fact about our cultural lives.³⁷

Cavell's point (at least in part), and the point I wish to emphasize, is that Emerson's standing in American thinking is unique and, from its own time forward, foundational, especially for purpose of this study, as an aesthetic thinker. American letters have not been the same since Emerson's early work, not only in the way we think about ourselves as Americans, but also in the way we think about ourselves as American artists. Emerson's strain of romanticism has never worked out of American literature, even in the high days of realism at the turn of the century, and writing after

Emerson seemed in some ways to be a response, either overtly, covertly, or aesthetically, to Emerson's body of work and imposing status.

Emerson's work, from *Nature* to the collected essays and lectures of his later years, demonstrate a uniquely American vision. Elisa New writes:

Emerson effected a crucial transfer of Divine power. What had been exclusively God's was now man's; what was once known only to God was now knowable through the agencies of a language. And with language given plenipotent, if not total power, Emerson could reclaim for the sons of Adam a faith in language's divine possibility. No more was the divine beyond human speech, His grace beyond our ken. On the contrary. Now, when through arduous, imaginative search we found God, we would know Him like a native tongue. He would speak to us in our own heart's language

These are the essential, readily recognizable tenets of what we have come to call American Romanticism, or what Harold Bloom has called the American Religion, Emersonianism. There is no disputing the power of this creed. As generations of religious historians have shown, it has established itself on the firmest ground possible: the ground of popular assent and national values.³⁸

Emerson's influence does not end in the nineteenth century. Following Cavell's inquiry, it is true that Emerson does not seem to belong (either correctly or incorrectly) to the realm of American philosophers. Nevertheless, his value as a setter of theological and intellectual precedents cannot be overestimated, and his thinking had such a formative affect on the American intellectual progeny that it seems more often assumed than considered unique. It is his value, though, as an aesthetic thinker that survives the nineteenth century in ways he could not have envisioned.

Indeed, as he believed that "each age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet," the world's poets would carry on, into the twentieth century, into a medium that grants poetry a verisimilitude that language could only approximate. Emerson was not a prophet of film criticism, and he did not knowingly anticipate the advent of the motion picture. But a testament to the ongoing value of Emerson's aesthetic criticism is that it allows us another

way to view motion pictures and consider their value, their currency, their claims to veracity, and the possibilities of the medium itself. Emerson believed the efficacy of poetry to be its potential to make truth present to humankind. In very much Emersonian terms, André Bazin writes of the possibilities of the camera:

The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities. It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its objects of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. By the power of photography, the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can see, nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist.³⁹

As early as 1836 Emerson was aware of the potential for the condition of seeing generated by mechanical means, and this condition as it related to his poet:

Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us. Certain mechanical changes, a small alteration in our local position apprizes us of a dualism. We are strangely affected by seeing the shore from a moving ship, from a balloon, or through the tints of an unusual sky. The least change in our point of view, gives the whole world a pictorial air. A man who seldom rides, needs only to get into a coach and traverse his own town, to turn the street into a puppet-show. The men, the women, - - talking, running, bartering, fighting, - - the earnest mechanic, the loungeur, the beggar, the boys, the dogs, are unrealized at once, or, at least, wholly detached from all relations to the observer, and seen as apparent, not substantial beings. What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of a rail-road car! Nay, the most wonted objects, (make a very slight change in the point of vision), please us most. In a camera obscura, the butcher's cart, and the figure of one of our own family amuse us. So a portrait of a well-known face gratifies us. Turn your eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs, and how agreeable is the picture, though you have seen it any time these twenty years!

In these cases, by mechanical means, is suggested the difference between the observer and the spectacle, - - between man and nature. Hence arises a pleasure mixed with awe; I may say, a low degree of the sublime is felt from the fact, probably, that man is hereby apprized, that, whilst the world is a spectacle, something in himself is stable.⁴⁰

Emerson articulates the distinction between observer and image, the dualism of the cinema spectacle. In the cinema we are affected by both our separation from the world before us and at the same time connected to it because it is real; as Cavell writes, it has “answers in reality,” and because of the verisimilitude unique to film. Emerson’s dualism becomes more complex when considered in terms of the motion picture, because we experience not only a “low degree of the sublime” from the disassociation of our *selves*, our willingness to be detached from our subjectivity and placed in a relative position to the screen and its images, but also an isolation, of sorts, from that world of the screen, a *real*, yet unapproachable world in any conventional sense of the term. Cavell writes of this condition:

We have here to do with something about the human capacity for sight, or for sensuous awareness generally, something we might express as our condemnation to project, to inhabit, a world that goes beyond the delivery of our senses. This seems to be the single point of agreement throughout the history of epistemology, at least throughout the modern history of the subject, say since Descartes. The most common conclusion among epistemologists has been some kind of skepticism - - a realization that we cannot, strictly speaking, be said to know, to be certain, of the existence of the world of material things at all.⁴¹

Bridging this gap, this uncomfortable dualism is, for Emerson, the prospect of *faith* and clarity of reason; these two values are not opposed in Emerson’s thinking: “when a faithful thinker, resolute to detach every object from personal relations, and see it in the light of thought, shall, at the same time, kindle science with the fire of holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into the creation.”⁴² Bear in mind that Emerson makes no separation between God and the individual; “the creation” is the individual’s creation of the world: “Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions.”⁴³

Emerson's optimism spares the individual the anxiety potential in the skeptical position of not knowing the world as such.

In the Introduction to "Poetry and Imagination," Emerson writes to the student of nature: "Every noun is an image. Nature gives him, sometimes in a flattered likeness, sometimes in caricature, a copy of every humor and shade in his character and mind. The world is an immense picture-book of every passage in human life."⁴⁴ And, in what could be a corollary passage, Bazin asks, "Is not neorealism primarily a kind of humanism and only secondarily a style of film-making? Then as to style itself, is it not essentially a form of self-effacement before reality?"⁴⁵ This essential humanism, along with the attempt to make cinema more real, will help bridge Emerson's gap between observer and spectacle, and help fulfill the potentialities of cinema necessary to raise the new medium from a nickelodeon attraction to a substantial art form. If Emerson could have chosen a "Representative Filmmaker," it would have been Charles Chaplin. However, the reputation of motion pictures in the early twentieth century was dismal and, indeed, motion pictures were vilified by social reformers as a major vice. The cinema needed an artist who could, through imagination and conviction, transform the medium from a lurid peepshow attraction to a legitimate art form. This was made possible, largely, through the technique and aesthetic vision of D. W. Griffith.

Notes

1. Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*. Trans. Edith Bone (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 21. It should be noted that this edition of Balázs' text is a reissue of the original 1952 edition, first published in London by Dennis Dobson Ltd.
2. See Chapter 2, n. 38.
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Intellect," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 198.
4. André Bazin, *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*. Trans. Alain Piette. Ed. Bert Cardullo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 73.
5. See Chapter 3, n. 26.
6. See Chapter 3, n. 30.
7. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 23-24.
8. Ibid., 25.
9. See Chapter 4, n. 77.
10. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," in *Letters and Social Aims. Centenary Edition: The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume VIII*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), 42.
11. See Chapter 4, n. 38.
12. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 182-83.
13. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 39.
14. André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume I*. Trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 12.
15. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 19-20.
16. Ibid., 29-30.
17. Ibid., 28.
18. Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume I*, 14.

19. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 29.
20. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume III: Essays: Second Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 6-7.
21. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*. In *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 9.
22. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 20.
23. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 188.
24. Emerson, *Nature*, 23.
25. Ibid., 20.
26. Ibid., 43.
27. Ibid., 7.
28. Ibid., 17.
29. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Uses of Great Men," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume IV: Representative Men: Seven Lectures*. Ed. Douglas Emory Wilson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 7.
30. Emerson, "The Poet," 9.
31. Emerson, *Nature*, 33-34.
32. Emerson, "The Poet," 7-8.
33. Ibid., 7.
34. Emerson, *Nature*, 22.
35. Stanley Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 14.
36. Emerson, *Nature*, 22.
37. Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," 18.

38. Elisa New, *The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 28.
39. Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume I*, 15.
40. Emerson, *Nature*, 30-31.
41. Stanley Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film?" in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 175.
42. Emerson, *Nature*, 44.
43. Ibid., 45.
44. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 9.
45. Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume I*, 29.

Chapter 7

Griffith

“The task I’m trying to achieve above all is to make you see.” -D. W. Griffith

America in 1908 was far different from the nation Emerson had envisioned from his New England home. While establishing precedents in theological and intellectual circles, as well as articulating a national poetry which, though seemingly idealistic, was within reach, as was demonstrated by Walt Whitman, his most direct heir, he could not have foreseen the new medium that would overrun America in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nor could he have foreseen the massive wave of immigrants, thirteen million from eastern and southern Europe, between 1900 and 1913, or the growth of urban areas from 28 percent to 52 percent of the population between 1870 and 1920.¹ Unlike literature, the silent motion picture could be understood by immigrant audiences not conversant in English. And, unlike the legitimate theater or the opera, the nickelodeon and “store front” theaters showing movies charged only five cents admission, and the shows ran continually; one could stay as long as one wished. And the movies changed daily; variety in style and subject was a great incentive for early audiences. However, the movies supplied by producers were not passed by any board of review and though, generally speaking, the attraction of the movies was the moving image itself, the subject matter of these films was, to the controlling American Victorian standards of the day, morally destructive, and, they believed, would be responsible for their greatest fear: the collapse of the family unit. The massive audiences drawn to movies insured that there would be no slowdown in production. As the movies appealed to qualities American Victorianism feared most - - the immigrants’ native festivals, looser moral codes of behavior, and their Catholicism - - the “genteel” as well as the

middle classes feared that the new immigrants were not being sufficiently “Americanized.” But what was worse was that, as they soon realized, their own sons and daughters were attending movies, and often the clubs and night spots the immigrant audiences frequented. Between 1895 and 1908, this was a serious problem indeed.

The motion picture recording and projection system was invented in the United States and France simultaneously in 1895, by Thomas Edison and by Georges Méliès and the brothers Lumière, respectively. Edison’s machine held early sway in the United States, but similar machines by Lumière, Méliès, and many very close offshoots, both foreign and domestic, made the motion picture widely available, inexpensive, and especially popular in urban areas. Initially, the theater owner rented the machine, film, and operator; later, as the technology improved and film gauge was standardized, only the film was rented, making operating costs even less. The subject, actually, was of little interest initially. The most common practice of the day was to establish one camera location, shoot a tableaux in front of it, include some extra shots, perhaps close ups, and send the processed print to the theater. The owner could place the extra shots wherever he liked, either before or after the film. The significance of the theater was the spectacle, the *attraction*. There was no pretense to art. When the attraction proved popular enough to suggest a market stability, the subject matter of many films appealed to the “lower nature” in men who frequented the theaters, which thrived on the novelty of the attraction as well as the (usually) lurid nature of the presentation. The social problem created by the “lurid amusements” was such that, on Christmas Day in 1908, New York Mayor George McClellan closed the movies of the city “as a part of a large campaign to eradicate the worst features of urban amusements.”² Such was the condition of the motion picture industry when, early in 1908,

D. W. Griffith, a struggling stage actor and failing writer, entered the Edison Studios looking for work writing scenarios for the movies. After one brief appearance in an Edison film, Griffith then made his way to the studio where he would expand the possibilities, and change the status, of the new medium: Biograph, located at 11 East Fourteenth Street in New York, “just another actor - - one of many - - looking for some work to tide him over until the summer stock season began.”³

David Wark Griffith was born January 22, 1875, on the family farm in Oldham County, Kentucky. He was the son of Confederate Colonel “Roaring Jake” Griffith, who entered military action at the age of 42, when the Civil War began, and fought until its end. Before the war, the Griffiths, while not exactly wealthy, owned 264 acres of farmland, considerable livestock, a manor house, and several slave families. Jake Griffith was, by all accounts, an active reader of literature and poetry, and encouraged the taste for literary culture in his family. David was an avid reader as well throughout his life; his earliest aspiration was to be a writer. In his unfinished autobiography, Griffith recalls:

As a small child, after having been sent to bed, I remember crawling cautiously back and hiding under the parlor table. I don’t imagine it was so much to listen to father’s literary readings as just to stay around with the grown-ups. A few neighbors would come in to gather round with the family and listen to father’s dramatic readings from Shakespeare and other classics.⁴

And, in a 1923 magazine article, Griffith writes, “Whatever of truth and beauty is discernible by a generous public in my eager output, I trace to a country boy used to hearing Keats and Tennyson and Shakespeare read at home.”⁵ David’s father had a taste for the dramatic to be sure, and perhaps a need for adventure and daring risks, a trait inherited by his son. David was the next to last of seven Griffith children and, along with the others, was as a youth educated at home by the eldest sister, Mattie, who had attended Millersburg Female College, which supplied teachers for

the local school system.⁶ After the Civil War, Jake Griffith eventually won a seat in the Kentucky Legislature, and in an 1878 letter home to Mattie, he insists, “The question here is not asked is he rich, but is he a man of brains. I want to prepare you for life, to be able to meet and act with life - - to be able to hold the ‘mirror up to nature.’ Force upon your brothers and sisters the dire necessity of cultivating their minds.”⁷ It is not known for certain, but it is entirely possible that Jake Griffith had taken this phrase from Emerson, whose writings he most surely would have known. In any case, the phrase would have implications for David Griffith, who would try, in his lifetime, to create ways of doing just that.

Griffith’s cultural horizon was broadened by the fortunate stroke of landing a job in Flexner’s Book Store in Louisville. He was hired to dust shelves and as he later remembered, he received only one admonition from the polite owner of the shop: “David, I don’t blame you for wanting to read the books, but don’t you think you should give a little time to dusting them, too - - at least, during working hours?”⁸ His real education came from the store’s eclectic clientele:

The Flexners were gentle, cultured people and the intelligentsia of Louisville and the countryside usually gathered in the back room of the store after closing hours to talk of mighty subjects. To this literary round table came such names as James Whitcomb Riley; Mary Johnson, author of *To Have and to Hold*; Adolph Clauber, a cousin of the Flexners who kept a photographic shop next door and later became dramatic critic of *The New York Times* and the husband of Jane Cowl.

It was my job to dust off the rows of books shelved in the store, but the only ones that got well cleaned were those near the table where mighty discussions were under way.⁹

Griffith’s literary influences have been well documented by critics, and Griffith himself was never short of comment on his sources of material and inspiration. Much is revealed about his intellectual mentors, and the people who, aside from his father, had a hand in shaping his own character:

I believe that the sense of beauty is developed by environment. If I had children I should try to develop in them a sense of beauty. To do this, I should provide them with rooms of such simple beauty as the one in which my father's orotund voice poured forth the music of Keats and Tennyson and Shakespeare. Longish rooms, not large, of rather low ceilings and pale gray walls, of dark furniture in graceful lines and of a few forceful pictures - - all portraits, among them a portrait of the magnificently ugly face of Abraham Lincoln, a portrait of the gentle philosopher of Concord, Emerson, one of George Washington, the country gentleman, the man who loved the great out-of-doors. There would be a portrait of Robert E. Lee. . . . I should have the portrait of General Grant, sturdy but gentle. . . . There would be one of the old Puritans, too, with their dreams hidden behind stern masks. And in the snow. Roger Williams the builder, rather than Miles Standish the soldier. And Thomas Paine. And a thinker of France: say, Rousseau. Each picture would be an epic.¹⁰

Interestingly, Griffith chooses the builder over the soldier, generals from both the Union and Confederate armies, and Emerson (he has, in several interviews, conflated the terms *truth* and *beauty*); his rooms seem dark, heavy, and full of portraits - - this in keeping with his Victorian tastes and values. Griffith made films from material by Browning, Tennyson, Cooper, London, Shakespeare, Poe, Tolstoy, Howells, Twain, Norris, as well as the Bible; he longed to make films of Homer's *Iliad*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Life of Napoleon*, and *Medea*.¹¹

He was a great admirer of Walt Whitman; Griffith once wrote that "the cinema camera is the agent of Democracy. It levels barriers between classes and races,"¹² a truly Whitmanesque sentiment, and later, in the same article, added, "For, paraphrasing Walt Whitman, 'To have great motion pictures, we must have good audiences, too.'"¹³ He also is suggestive of Whitman when he wrote of his experiences as a struggling actor on the road, during which time he often took hard labor jobs, "Every phase of life is good for you if you face it all rightly, with fine cheer. For tramps, artists, ironworkers, actors, writers - - all of us - - are alike in our souls; it was knowing all manner of men that I derived my most useful education."¹⁴ Moreover, he reaffirms Whitman's (and Wordsworth's) diction in a sense, writing, "The new drama has the simplicity of youth - - it

has done away with bombastic, high-falutin' talk.”¹⁵ In the same article, he writes this Emerson-like statement (of the many he would compose): “No matter how contorted one way or another the soul may be, the man is still a man, and with recognizable traits of relationship to all men.”¹⁶ Griffith's debt to Dickens is enormous and well documented, perhaps most significantly by Sergei Eisenstein's 1949 essay “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today,” which will be examined more closely in the next chapter.

Griffith's literary background is significant because Griffith appears at the time when motion pictures were at their lowest state in public estimation (according to the defenders of the public good, those of the social reform movement), and it seemed unlikely that the film industry would ever become anything more than a fairground amusement. Griffith realized a potentiality in film that had not been recognized by anyone else: that the cinema could be a great tool for education (indeed, he believed that motion pictures would one day replace books in school libraries as the sole means of education), moral reconstitution, and the preservation of the American Victorian values he cherished, as well as being an opportunity to bring classic literature to the public. Lary May writes:

More than any previous film maker, Griffith used the potential of the camera to photograph real people in real settings, avoiding artificial sets. The camera, he argued, was a “cold blooded, truth telling, grim device that registers every gesture . . . every glimmer of emotion.” A director should show ordinary people, so that the spirit would be seen as emanating from the democracy. Griffith never used his camera to alter the clarity, balance, and perspective of the world. But he did use realism in the same way as one of his favorite authors, Charles Dickens, to show the way the world ran and inspire the viewers to change it.¹⁷

In fact, Griffith's 1910 film of Browning's *Pippa Passes* was the first film reviewed, and favorably so, by the *New York Times*. Griffith realized that he was at a point of transition between cultural

values, between the country he knew as a southerner of some distinction and the nation after the Civil War, and between media: print, stage, and film. Griffith saw aesthetic possibilities inherent in the cinema, and through it he would assimilate staging and narrative techniques, thus bringing culture to the masses and increasing the prestige of the cinema. May writes that

Griffith saw it as his duty to reinvigorate middle-class mores by spreading the message of high culture to the masses. In order to show how beauty was the handmaiden of truth, he drew themes from the drama and literature of Anglo-Saxon culture, and the formal subject matter of nineteenth century novels. Each was clearly presented, with balanced composition that would be understandable to all, so that the audience would learn how the world operated. To heighten the realism, Griffith would draw on the research of scholars, archaeologists, and academic painters for precision and accuracy. Behind this democratizing drive was an effort to depict the truth about the world, and the morals that operated within it.¹⁸

Indeed, in 1908, the cinema was in need of help if it was to evolve beyond its “nickelodeon” status at all. Richard Schickel notes, “By 1905, when John P. Harris and his brother-in-law . . . coined . . . the pretty name by which these little theaters quickly became generically known, there were hundreds of ‘nickelodeons’ in the United States. By the time Griffith found his way to Biograph, the estimate is, there were 10,000 of them.”¹⁹ Griffith was once quoted as saying, “Reform was sweeping the country, newspapers were laying down a barrage against gambling, rum, and light ladies, particularly light ladies. There were complaints against everything, so I decided to reform the motion picture industry.”²⁰ Though May is correct in acknowledging that Griffith overestimated his own historical role, Griffith was sincere in his new vision for cinema. May notes some of the reasons for, and significance of, Griffith’s success between 1908-1915:

His aesthetics were used to dramatize the social and cultural tensions of the era, giving them an explicitly Protestant tone. Reporters referred to him as the “messianic savior of the movie art, a prophet who made shadow sermons more powerful than the pulpit.” While creating a style that evoked such metaphors, his films dramatized every major concern of the day: labor-management conflict, white slavery, eugenics, prohibition, women’s

emancipation, and civic corruption. In all his cinematic dramas, he affirmed a cultural tradition that placed familial values at the heart of political life.²¹

Certainly May is correct in his accounting, in part, for Griffith's success (at least until the controversy surrounding *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915); his emphasis on the family is unquestionable, his politics are always subjugated to moral concerns, and his Protestant tone grew, no doubt, from his childhood and from the moral indignity he felt at the loose morals and the freewheeling life of the acting profession while he was on the road (although he did occasionally indulge himself, which may have created guilt that further fueled his moralistic tone). Indeed, his stage experiences, both on the boards and off, determined important techniques he would later envision for establishing tone and staging for film scenes.

Griffith brought considerable stage experience and literary background to Biograph in 1908. He had taken to the road as an aspiring actor and dramatist, from which experience he learned much about the techniques of stagecraft and scene construction, especially regarding the nineteenth century melodrama he so much loved. A. Nicholas Vardac's excellent 1949 study *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* remains the best source for Griffith's assimilation of stagecraft of the nineteenth century. However, it was not only the melodrama that enticed Griffith, but its themes that would define many of his films: temperance, the purity of the innocent female, the importance of the family unit, Protestantism, all values that were inherited in part from his Kentucky rural background and the Victorianism of his day. Indeed, in an interview written for *The New York American* in February 1915, Griffith defends the moral possibilities of the new art:

If I had a growing son I should be willing to let him see motion pictures as he liked, because I believe they would be an invaluable aid to his education. They would stimulate

his imagination, without which no one will go very far. They would also give him a fund of knowledge, history and otherwise, and all good. And they would shape his character along the most rigid plane of human conduct. In moving pictures the code of conduct is hard and fast. No one need fear that it will deviate from the Puritan plane.²²

Griffith's praise as a "messiah" of the motion picture was perhaps more firmly grounded in Griffith than the reporters realized. Griffith, like Swedenborg, Blake, and Jonathan Edwards before him, had an experience of epiphany as a youth:

One morning on the way to school [Griffith] had a visionary experience that stayed with him for a lifetime. It was after a sleet storm and the branches of the trees were gleaming with glaze. One group of branches was struck by the sun in such a way as to create a halo effect; Griffith thought the face of Christ appeared to him in its center, and he politely introduced himself: "My name is David and you know that means dearly beloved. I do hope you may like me a little, that I might even become your dearly beloved, because I love you and always have."²³

The vision apparently reaffirmed Griffith's Methodist convictions, and perhaps lent his life, once he had (at thirty three years of age) found his place in the world, a sense of providence. Certainly the experience directly inspired two famous Griffith images, Christ pacifying the nations at the end of *The Birth of a Nation* and the flight of angels bringing peace at the close of *Intolerance*. And perhaps the effect of the lighting stayed with Griffith as well; he was quoted as saying, regarding his famous "hazy photography" effect, "If we believe in these images of pure and sweet beauty, we must confess it was done by the hand of God himself."²⁴

If Griffith did not share Emerson's distaste for Christian orthodoxy, his sense of belief was nonetheless sincere. May effectively describes the moral rhetoric of Griffith's cinema:

Griffith believed that an image projected on a screen could become a tool for completing the great goal of history: lifting mankind from animality. The camera was a God-given means for communicating. Regardless of language, background, or class, everyone could comprehend the universal language of silent pictures. . . . A viewer watching a motion picture saw a production that had been perfected, duplicated, and sent out to the country. When the patrons entered a darkened theater, they saw a standardized creation. They did

not look at a unique performance, for it had been completed in advance. Nor did the spectator choose what to look at on the screen. That had been decided by the director. Audiences could then relax much of their active rational minds, and let the images penetrate deep into their subconscious. Mesmerized in the darkness and absorbed into the crowd, viewers shed the concerns of social life, and even relinquished their individuality, giving themselves up to the magnified, larger-than-life images that raced across the screen.²⁵

The uniqueness of the medium itself makes the phenomenon possible. But just how do we consider a medium that is utterly unique to audiences of the early twentieth century? At least part of the early overwhelming success of film was the novelty of the medium. But Griffith determined, in large part, latent possibilities in the medium which he brought to the fore, creating a cinema of far greater significance. Cavell considers the question of how to qualify film in relation to other expressive media:

We need always to be returning to the fact of how mysterious these objects called movies are, unlike anything else on earth. They have the evanescence of performances and the permanence of recordings, but they are not recordings (because there is nothing independent of them to which they owe fidelity); and they are not performances (because they are perfectly repeatable).²⁶

Interestingly, Cavell uses the term “mysterious,” because films are a kind of mystery, not in the technological sense, but in the ontological sense. In a manner of speaking, film requires a kind of faith on the part of the viewer, that quality May refers to as “giving themselves up.” This may be thought of as another expression of the idea of suspension of disbelief (and what is faith if *not* a suspension of disbelief?), but the mystery lies in the evocative power of the image, and specifically (unlike painting or sculpture) an image made of light, and one we know is not only not real (in that it does not conform to the report of our senses in a way that everyday experience is), but in a way non-existent (that we cannot touch it, or handle it, or view it from any other angle). Cavell asserts, in regard to representational art, that “we can be sure that the view of painting as dead

without reality, and the view of painting as dead with it, are both in need of development in the views each takes of reality and of painting. We can say, painting and reality no longer *assure* one another.”²⁷ Cavell is considering here the relation between the viewer and art, as well as the relationship of art to reality (and thus the unique position of film as art). He continues:

It could be said . . . that what painting wanted, in wanting connection with reality, was a sense of *presentness* - - not exactly a conviction of the world’s presence to us, but of our presence to it. At some point the unhinging of our consciousness from the world interposed our subjectivity between us and our presentness to the world. Then our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation. The route to conviction in reality was through the acknowledgment of that endless presence of self. . . . To speak of our subjectivity as the route back to our conviction in reality is to speak of romanticism. Perhaps romanticism can be understood as the natural struggle between the representation and the acknowledgment of our subjectivity

Photography overcame subjectivity in a way painting undreamed of by painting, a way that could not satisfy painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether: by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction.²⁸

The point at which our consciousness became unhinged from the world is the point recognized in Christian history as the Fall, which both symbolizes the separation of human consciousness from the world, and determines the human attempt to reconnect with the world through art. That photography is the basic unit of the filmic apparatus is significant in this seeming paradox between our being present at, or in the experience of, a film (due to the unique verisimilitude of the medium itself) and our separation from the world, which we recognize as real, on the screen, a world we cannot participate in. Cavell clarifies his terminology for us:

The material basis of the media of movies (as paint on a flat, delimited support is the material basis of the media of painting) is, in the terms which have so far made their appearance, *a succession of automatic world projections*. “Succession” includes the various degrees of motion in moving pictures: the motion depicted; the current of successive frames in depicting it; the juxtapositions of cutting. “Automatic” emphasizes the mechanical fact of photography, in particular the absence of the human hand in forming these objects and the absence of its creatures in their screening. “World” covers the

ontological facts of photography and its subjects. “Projection” points to the phenomenological facts of viewing, and to the continuity of the camera’s motion as it ingests the world.²⁹

Emerson approaches this dilemma of separation in *Nature* by conceding the unreliability of the senses while privileging the “eye of Reason”:

But while we acquiesce entirely in the permanence of natural laws, the question of the absolute existence of nature, still remains open. It is the uniform effect of culture on the human mind, not to shake our faith in the stability of particular phenomena, as of heat, water, azote; but to lead us to regard nature as a phenomenon, not a substance; to attribute necessary existence to spirit; to esteem nature as an accident and an effect.

To the senses and the unrenewed understanding, belongs a sort of instinctive belief in the absolute existence of nature. In their view, man and nature are indissolubly joined. Things are ultimates, and never look beyond their sphere. The presence of Reason mars this faith. The first effort of thought tends to relax this despotism of the senses, which binds us to nature as if we were a part of it, and shows us nature aloof, and, as it were, afloat. Until this higher agency intervened, the animal eye sees, with wonderful accuracy, sharp outlines and colored surfaces. When the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added, grace and expression. These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate somewhat of the angular distance of objects. If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best, the happiest moments of life, are these delicious awakenings of the higher powers, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God.³⁰

Emerson does *not* claim that nature does not exist materially, as does neither Cavell nor Griffith.

Emerson, rather, makes his distinction between conditions of seeing; the “animal eye” sees the apparent world, while the “eye of Reason” opens the apparent world, like the withdrawing of a veil, to expose the form behind the apparent world. Cavell, in a sense, answers this distinction by re-defining it in terms of our *presentness* to the world and our *absence* from the world, a distinction we are driven to mediate through art. For Emerson, though, the mediation is through Reason, or what might be said to be an epiphany of the world withdrawing itself and making ‘real’ the “causes and spirits” of nature. He writes in *The Divinity School Address*:

[T]he moment the mind opens, and reveals the laws which transverse the universe, and make things what they are, then shrinks the great world at once into a mere illusion and fable of [man's] mind. What am I? and What is? asks the human spirit with a curiosity new-kindled, but never to be quenched. Behold these outrunning laws, which our imperfect apprehension can see tend this way and that, but not come full circle. Behold these infinite relations, so like, so unlike; many, yet one. I would study, I would know, I would admire forever. These works have been the entertainments of the human spirit in all ages.³¹

It is what Emerson calls the “utter impotence to test the authenticity of the report of my senses”³² that determined that this “new-kindled curiosity” is “never to be quenched.” This is not unlike Cavell’s recognition of the attempts of painting to reconnect us with the world, or his definition of romanticism as the “natural struggle between the representation and the acknowledgment of our subjectivity.” Cavell’s qualification of this struggle as “natural” suggests that it is an inherent, and inescapable, human condition, an implication Emerson affirms. Emerson raises a slightly modified version of the problem; that is, how to test the veracity of the senses? Cavell and Emerson both acknowledge that this is not possible by accepting our separation from the world. But whereas Cavell finds some mediation through painting (and film, which complicates the problem further), Emerson trusts his intuition, the eternal forms behind the apparent world, of nature “withdrawing before its God.” May suggests that Griffith encounters this same dilemma, and that the condition is best mediated through film in a way that art - - painting or language - - cannot satisfy. Indeed, according to May, Griffith’s work allows for a reconnection with the world and a realization of eternal forms of nature:

[Griffith’s] film transported the viewer to a more spiritual realm of existence, a sphere of the sublime. This was possible, according to Griffith, because the crowd watching a film did not receive its message in traditional ways. Screen images were not transmitted through the ears, like music, or the hands. Instead the medium communicated through the eyes, which he considered non-sensory organs, removed from material reality and closer to the purity of ideas. In other words, the human being was seen as divided into mind and

body. Other organs were part of the body, but the eyes were closer to the soul. Silent film worked solely through vision; and like the “hand of God,” Griffith it lifting people from their “commonplace existence” into a sphere of “poetic simulations.”³³

Is this not what Emerson called for as the role, and responsibility, of the poet? Except for the fact that Griffith divides the whole man into mind and body, a division Emerson will not strictly allow, they both agree on the eyes as direct conduit to the soul, as well as the importance of vision in communicating the divine message to the soul, which both men would agree is the “sphere of ‘poetic simulations’.”

Griffith’s first film as a director, for Biograph in 1908, was a one-reeler called *The Adventures of Dollie*. The plot of this story, common fare for the time, involves a child stolen from her family by gypsies, and hidden in a sealed barrel. As the gypsies make their escape, the barrel falls into a stream, where eventually it is discovered by two boys who happen to be fishing there and hear Dollie’s cries. Dollie is thus reunited with her parents, and all ends well. Griffith got the directing job because Biograph’s best director, George McCutcheon, was ill, and replacements proved ineffective. Griffith agreed to step in (after being assured he could keep his acting job if he failed; if not, he would have declined), and immediately began casting the picture with types which suited him, not the “lemons for actors” he had heard he would be given.³⁴ Immediately he was concerned with people who looked the parts they would play; this is an early indication of Griffith’s approach to filmmaking (and indeed he did not use any Biograph actors assigned to the film). The film contains Griffith’s first use of parallel editing to heighten tension. Rather than shoot the barrel’s trip downstream as a single sequence (since the camera was stationary - - it could not track or pan), Griffith shot footage of the barrel’s journey as well as shots of the anxious parents’ expressions. Then, he intercut the footage, and thus heightened the tension of

the melodrama. This technique proved successful, as *Dollie* was a well-received film by audiences and those inside the Biograph studio. This is the somewhat humble beginning of Griffith's restructuring of cinematic technique, a consideration of which is important in understanding not only Griffith's sense of the importance of the quality of his films (which, again, was unique for the time), but also the techniques he devised and appropriated, most of the time motivated by necessity, for the delivery of his visual messages.

Tom Gunning, in his important book *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, makes a distinction between the "cinema of attractions" and the "cinema of narrative integration," which Griffith pioneered and which helped to grant legitimacy to American cinema as an art form. Gunning defines the cinema of attractions:

This term indicates that filmmakers such as Méliès or the British pioneer G. A. Smith were fascinated by other possibilities of the cinema than its storytelling potential. Such apparently different approaches as the trick film and actuality filmmaking unite in using cinema to present a series of views to audiences, views fascinating because of their illusory power . . . and exoticism. The cinema of attractions, rather than telling stories, bases itself on film's ability to show something. . . . this is an exhibitionist cinema, a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world to solicit the attention of its spectator.³⁵

This form of cinema was the norm before 1908. The condition of seeing the world in the way Gunning describes is supported by Cavell's view that part of the human desire to connect with the world is to have a *view* of it:

To say that we wish to view the world itself is to say that we are wishing for the condition of viewing as such. That is our way of establishing our connection to the world: through viewing it, or having views of it. Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as to look *out at* it, from behind the self.³⁶

The implication of Cavell's statement is that *seeing* the world is an essential human condition, much in the same way that Emerson emphasizes having visual contact with nature. This, then, supposes that the cinema of attractions must necessarily have preceded the cinema of narrative integration. Audiences learned to "see" the world *projected* before they could learn to see self-contained narratives which they could recognize as real, but were not *present* to in that they could have no affect on them. In other words, audiences learned to look at the world before they learned to accept stories in the world autonomous from their own experience. The transformation from the cinema of attractions to the cinema of narrative integration marks this point of implicating the audience, through narrative identification, with the film. Gunning writes:

Griffith narrativized the levels of filmic discourse [tense, mood, voice]³⁷ already considerably developed by his predecessors, channeling them toward the primary task of storytelling. In contrast the cinema of attractions, which accented film's ability to present a view of an event curious or astounding in itself, the story became the unifying structure of a film, the center that determined the filmic narrator's choice of elements of filmic discourse. And it is in terms of the story that the spectator understood the figures of filmic discourse presented. The bond between filmic narrator and spectator is guaranteed by narrativization.³⁸

With the process of "narrativizing" individual units of film, that is, shooting films with emphasis on the shot or scene as the focus of a piece contributing to a larger whole, rather than envisioning the film as a complete, uninterrupted unit in itself, Griffith utilized the techniques he had acquired - - the close up, lighting effects, change of camera position (establishing point of view) - - to inform audiences that a story was being communicated, and these techniques were the elements to direct their attention and guide their connections from one scene to another. For example, Gunning notes that in the film *The Redman and the Child* (1908), Griffith's second film (following *The Adventures of Dollie*), he shows a full shot of the Indian looking through a

surveyor's telescope, cuts to a rounded mask shot of what the Indian is seeing, and then cuts back to the Indian's reaction. Gunning comments that "this brief, three-shot sequence is a pivotal point in Griffith's introduction of the narrator system."³⁹ *Variety* noted in its review of the film that "here a clever bit of trick work is introduced to bring about an intensely dramatic situation . . . immediately the field of the picture contracts to a circle and the scene is brought before the audience as though through the eye of the Indian glued to the telescope."⁴⁰ This, according to Gunning, is an early example of how a "trick" (according to the *Variety* reviewer) becomes "narrativized"; Griffith uses the technique to establish a character's point of view.⁴¹ Now, scenes like this could not be entirely accomplished on location; editing became a principal factor in the art of the narrative film.

Editing film, especially for the purposes of intensifying the narrative, was virtually unheard of at the time. Of its significance Ernest Lindgren writes,

"The foundation of the film art is editing"; this statement with which [V. I.] Pudovkin begins his classic little manual *Film Technique* is as valid today as when it first appeared in 1928, and it seems likely to remain so as long as the cinema may last. . . . The development of film technique, in fact, has been primarily the development of editing, for it was a device virtually unknown to the earliest film-makers.⁴²

Likewise, Richard Schickel correctly observes that "[Griffith] seems instinctively to have sensed that the camera had an unrealized potential as a more active participant in the creation of the mood, the manipulation of audience response, and as a kind of psychologist."⁴³

That Griffith did not invent the techniques attributed to him at one time (or those he claimed for himself) has been long proven by scholars. Griffith appropriated techniques he was aware of, and it is possible (as he claims in his autobiography) that he was not aware of previous use of the close up and parallel action when he first used the devices himself in *The Adventures of*

Dollie.⁴⁴ However, the use Griffith made of these techniques *intuitively* is significant. Griffith realized he could intensify the emotive power of his films, and more accurately communicate the moral significance of them, through editing separate scenes to create a unified whole. This is especially important considering the status of the director before the 1920s and the implications for Griffith's consideration of the film as an *assemblage* of images.

By the time Griffith arrived at Biograph, the directors who worked on films (at Biograph and other studios as well) did little more than organize their actors and describe their parts to them. Dominant control over the look of the film was in the hands of the cameraman, who decided the lighting schemes, makeup, blocking, framing, and camera positions. Biograph had two cameramen on staff at the time of Griffith's arrival, the congenial Arthur Marvin and the easygoing Billy Bitzer, the latter of whom often clashed with the director over what could and could not be done with the camera. When Griffith began to take control of his sets - - much in the same way, he imagined, his father controlled a legion of soldiers - - he was remembered by Lillian Gish as "a zealot of a new and uncorrupted art."⁴⁵ Griffith was indeed the head of his company; as Richard Schickel notes, "Griffith's reminiscences about his family impress upon an observer familiar with his later career that he organized his motion picture company - - the only family he knew in his adult life - - along the lines that had first been laid out to him as a child at Lofty Green."⁴⁶ He preferred a repertory cast and crew, rather than take studio assigned actors and technicians for each project. He did, however, take great interest in his female lead; he wanted young actresses who could portray frailty, innocence, purity, and virtue, in keeping with his melodramatic tastes (and his Victorian beliefs) that, for women, there were fates worse than death. Well before the star system had been introduced in Hollywood, he gave Biograph its first

“star,” Florence Lawrence, the original “Biograph Girl.” He also discovered, along the way, Mary Pickford, Blanche Sweet, Constance Talmadge, Carol Dempster, Theda Bara, Mae Marsh, Dorothy Gish and, his ideal (and always his favorite) actress, Lillian Gish. Richard Schickel observes:

The model for the organization he was beginning to build was the theatrical stock company. By forcing his people to play a lead one day, an extra role the next, he kept them in a state of malleable anxiety and he also prevented most of them from getting exaggerated notions of their importance in the Biograph scheme of things. Moreover, this policy prevented other centers of creative or artistic power from developing within the studio. As Blanche Sweet was later to say, “Griffith was the whole show.”⁴⁷

Lillian Gish recalls:

He let no one hamper the realization of his visions. As I came to know Billy Bitzer better, I found that he didn't seem to take anything seriously. He was jolly and easygoing even in the midst of pressure - - an amusing relief for Mr. Griffith. But often he would balk at Mr. Griffith's suggestions. Mr. Griffith, however, always obtained what he wanted in the end. He would see a scene in his mind and ask Billy to translate it.⁴⁸

Janet Staiger, in her book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, distinguishes between “the cameraman system of production,” from 1896 to 1907, and the “the director system of production,” from 1908 forward.⁴⁹ By shifting control of films away from the camera operators and more toward the individual view of the director, Griffith began to institute the “director's cinema.” Now, at least with Griffith, it was his personal vision, and not just the technician's proficiency, that mattered most in a film.

Griffith's literary and cultural background added to his intuitive design for the visions he had in his mind, those that would best suit the scene he was shooting. Griffith had been trained in the theater, and he knew quite a bit about scene construction and story development. He also knew the stagecraft of the theater, and when he began shooting his films, he realized that this approach

to filmmaking (which was the norm for the period) would not suffice for film. Whether or not Griffith appropriated the close up from another film or was indeed unaware of its use, his memory of using the technique for the first time is telling:

The first pictures closely imitated stage technique. The characters came on, did their bits, and went off, exactly as they do on the stage. . . . The bosses told me [for *The Adventures of Dollie*] to shoot the pictures so as to get full-sized figures. These full figures, however, appeared so distant on the screen that the audience could not see the actor's expressions. So I dared to make a close view - - just their faces. It is now called the "close-up."

Billy Bitzer, famous cameraman of that day, refused to take this kind of picture. He said it would throw the background out of focus. This was a puzzler. So I journeyed up to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and spent quite some time studying the works of great painters. Rembrandt and other painters backed me up. All painted pictures showing only the face.

Managing to get another cameraman, we photographed the close-up.⁵⁰

Griffith had, for the first time, circumvented the cameraman's authority and asserted his own, at least on his sets. This episode is significant also for the fact that Griffith went outside the medium of film for an answer to a filmic problem. Another instance of this was Griffith's realization that the cinema had no equivalent for the stage's slow curtain. He had noticed that when Bitzer stopped down the lens (in other words, made the lens aperture smaller) while shooting outdoors, the resulting image would gradually dim. Griffith knew that lingering too long over a closing shot, for instance of a couple kissing (the appropriate close for a comedy of the period), caused audiences to giggle. Schickel writes: "He had seen out-takes of the fade effect - - which seemed only to be ruined film to everyone else - - and now he simply ordered Bitzer to deliberately create the effect when they were working on a kiss sequence. It had the desired suppressive effect on audience risibility."⁵¹ Griffith's ability to break standard practices and recognize a useful technique remains part of his importance in establishing the status of film as more than simply an

“amusement.” Mistakes that become inspirations - - such as Griffith’s finding the fade effect among ruined footage - - are only possible if someone with the necessary perception is present to make the connective leap. Again, in this sense Griffith’s role in inventing techniques which became indispensable to filmmaking is a moot point in an aesthetic sense.

Griffith also contributed significantly to the lighting and staging of scenes. A. Nicholas Vardac notes that

in *Edgar Allen Poe* (Biograph, 1909), he achieved a three-dimensional quality, therefore greater realism in photography, with the use of light and shade. It is of interest, too, that this new photographic realism was again coupled with a subject straight from the heart of nineteenth-century romance, dealing, as it did, with Poe’s *The Raven* and incidents in the poet’s baroque and abnormal life. The need for realism in photography led Griffith into further successful experiments with lighting. In *A Drunkard’s Reformation* (Biograph, 1909), he photographed fire burning in a fireplace in a darkened room. The weird, grotesque effect, with its ephemeral shadows and fugitive figures, created a startling and realistic illusion on the screen.⁵²

Two different versions of Griffith’s discovery of “hazy photography” came to be, but both versions assert the same conclusion. Conventionally, actors were photographed with the sun directly behind the camera so that the light fell on the actors. Griffith writes that “all scenes had to be photographed in this manner and the most beautiful girl in the world would have gotten a raw deal.” Griffith wanted to find a way to realize what he saw in his mind, “lovely pastoral scenes with the light coming from behind [the actors],”⁵³ but was assured that photographed in this way, the actor’s faces would be black. An experimental shooting day confirmed this as true. Bitzer claims that Griffith’s inspiration came upon seeing Mary Pickford and Owen Moore walking along a road of white shells; Griffith recalls that he thought of using a tablecloth from a New Jersey restaurant where he and several actors were dining as a reflector. He began to shoot scenes with backlit scenes, with a strong overhead light reflected into the actor’s faces from a

white sheet under their feet.⁵⁴ Griffith solved an aesthetic problem, by accident in either account, but again it is his motivation for the right feel for his scene that allows him to break from the conventions of “amusements” to more sophisticated forms of visual imagery and symbolism. His technical innovations were always subjected to the demands of the story; the importance of this is that he envisioned the story in his mind in a way that reformed the apparent world. Like Emerson’s poet, Griffith knew intuitively that “the virtue in art lies in detachment, in sequestering one object from the embarrassing variety,”⁵⁵ for this is what Griffith’s lighting and framing techniques achieve. Griffith had that quality of isolating the symbol and making it the “deputy of the world,” in Emerson’s words: “The power to detach, and to magnify by detaching, is the essence of rhetoric in the hands of the orator and the poet.”⁵⁶

This “power to detach” also served Griffith in his use of the iris. The effect Griffith wanted was one that would allow the audience to focus on the actions or emotions of a particular part of a scene on screen. Schickel writes:

[Griffith] asked Bitzer if there weren’t simply some way to throw the background out of focus briefly in order to highlight a single player or bit of action without changing setups. Bitzer experimented with a gauze filter with a hole cut in the center of it. But it blurred the background without eliminating it, and Bitzer found the effect distracting. Worse, it looked to the uninitiated as if the cameraman had been careless and that was intolerable to a man who prided himself on the sharpness of his images. But the new technique required a lens shade. . . . So he improvised a shade out of a La Page’s glue bottle, the bottom of which he had tapped out, the remainder of which he had fastened around the excellent two-inch, f. 3.5 Zeiss Tessar lens (undoubtedly the best then in use in the movies) with which the Biograph camera was equipped. The shade worked admirably indoors, but outdoors, when the lens was stopped down to compensate for the increased light, its depth of field was increased and the edge of the glue pot was thrown into focus, blacking out a large portion of the screen. It was precisely the effect Griffith wanted⁵⁷

Indeed, though they were working with the best available technology of the time, Griffith and Bitzer were inhibited somewhat by the (comparatively) slow 3.5 lens as well as the (definitely)

slow and narrow tonal scale of Eastman's orthochromatic film stock. Still, Griffith had a precise vision that carried more than aesthetic implications. Griffith knew that the cinema could show that "in a democratic society high ideals were found not only in the realm of nobles or the wealthy, but also in the daily lives of everyone."⁵⁸ May considers the effect of the iris on Griffith's ideal view of the world:

Film exposed the viewer to whole realms of experience outside his day-to-day world. Yet to evoke idealism from this extended reality, the director used his tools to manipulate the medium and show God's will surfacing in the chaos of material life. No doubt one of the most noted ways of illustrating this was through the "iris." . . . On a darkened screen, a small dot would appear. Slowly it opened and a beam of light revealed the action. As the drama unfolded, it was as if the viewer used a spiritual eye to penetrate the truth of life.

Once the iris opened, special lighting would show a world where the demarcations of good and evil were clear. . . . The audience would have no trouble as to who was among the elect, and who among the damned. Griffith instructed his central characters that they, in turn, must radiate the "light within that puts characterization across." This was a clearly Protestant concept of redemption, and Griffith was well aware of it.⁵⁹

Thus Griffith was aware of his position to promote spiritual messages through symbols of strong import by utilizing whatever techniques he intuited, often developing seminal uses of the camera by improvisation or because of the necessities of the story.

Griffith had a feeling for the *right* way a story should be told, the way he determined to be *true*, and this intuition never failed his aesthetic instincts. Griffith wrote, in 1927, "Many useful new tools for the making of pictures have been created since those early perplexities, but the big implement was then and always will be the mind-power to narrate a story in the medium. Technique is only experience, it is not force."⁶⁰ The significance of this statement is the phrase *in the medium*. Griffith is stressing the importance of narrating a motion picture, as opposed to a

stage play or a novel; he both acknowledges his influences and dismisses them as irrelevant as a narrative force in cinema at the same time. Later in that same year Griffith wrote:

Most motion pictures are adapted from stage plays and books. The ways of expression used in pictures are different from plays and books. People think in words. It will be a long time before people will think in terms of pictures. Ideas are all right for stage people, but pictures prefer simple, straight stories of facts.⁶¹

Griffith's observation that "people think in words" may be only his way of saying that people have been accustomed to narrative through literature, and that time will be required for the mind to adapt ways of seeing films (or "reading" films) as narratives. Or, his statement might be read as an ontological statement about the condition of motion picture narrative. Griffith made this comment in 1927, twelve years after *The Birth of a Nation* premiered, and one would think that Griffith's audiences would be accustomed to filmed narratives, at least to the point of comprehending the narrative techniques Griffith employed to cue film viewers as to what was happening, and when, on the screen. This was a problem Griffith (and the Biograph bosses) had initially been concerned with, but the concern proved unfounded.

Why is Griffith troubled by this problem of narrativity just as the motion picture was entering its sound era? Griffith's innovative applications of technique, such as the close-up, required new modes of expression from actors; as well, his use of different camera setups, cross-cutting, and his rather heavy reliance on intertitles made film literacy easily assimilated by the audiences of the previous twenty years. The distinction between "thinking in words" and "thinking in pictures" seems to be, as applicable to this discussion, not so much a *neurological* one as an *aesthetic* one. Stanley Cavell, in consideration of film's capacity for particular literary forms, writes that

unlike the prose of comic theatrical dialogue after Shakespeare, film has a natural equivalent for the medium of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry. I think of it as the poetry of

film itself, what it is that happens to figures and objects and places as they are variously molded and displaced by a motion-picture camera and then projected and screened. Every art, every worthwhile human enterprise, has its poetry, ways of doing things that perfect the possibilities of the enterprise itself, make it the one it is.⁶²

This idea suggests, perhaps, that Griffith realized the motion picture has exceeded in its expression the condition of audiences to comprehend the multiform meanings in pictorial composition and movement, which is the difference between following a narrative and understanding it as an instructional message, conveying universal truths through *visual* symbols. For Griffith, “simple, straight stories of facts,” told in *pictures*, carry more potential educational force than expository prose. Perhaps Griffith, in this passage, wants audiences to see what he sees in motion pictures (especially his own): that, in Emerson’s terms, nature presents itself as a “picture-language”; or, as he writes in “The Over-Soul,” “the soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after.”⁶³ The caveat here is that images on a cinema screen are things, not words. Obviously this is true in a practical sense, but it is also true in an ontological sense, because while images may be described by words, and words may describe images, there seems to be a dual channel that is not precisely equal. Cinema may take on, for the purposes of theorizing, some similar qualities of a “language,” or film narrative may be thought of as being structured like a language, but the images of motion pictures themselves do not constitute a language, though they may present conditions whereby explanations are desired, or required. It is certainly beyond reason to suggest that audiences should answer filmic questions by constructing films of their own; however, the ontological point to be made is that audiences should, according to Griffith, think of pictures *as* pictures, and not as a ‘fleshing out’ of a prose idea. If audiences are thinking in words about things, such as visual images and their multiplicity, they have fallen

short of cinema's potential to communicate emotively, uniquely. And Emerson makes this declaration in the "Language" chapter of *Nature*:

Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to us the delicate affections. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. Visible distance behind and before us, is respectively our image of memory and hope.⁶⁴

Griffith subjugated reason to intuition when the matter was one of how to visually communicate with an audience; in effect, he knew how to translate the material of the apparent world into the poetic symbols of the visions of truth he had formed in his mind.

Griffith's debt to Charles Dickens has been well documented. Griffith wrote, in 1917:

I borrowed the "cutback" from Charles Dickens. Novelists think nothing of leaving one set of characters in the midst of affairs and going back to deal with earlier events in which another set of characters is involved. I elaborated the "cutback" to the "story within a story" and to the so-called parallel action. I found that the picture could carry, not merely two, but even three or four simultaneous threads of action - - all without confusing the spectator. . . . My point is that photographic drama is continually progressing, and he is indeed foolish who would set arbitrary limits as to what it can or cannot accomplish in the course of its marvellous evolution.⁶⁵

By the time Griffith had made the statements above, he had already completed *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), both films more than three and one-half hours long. As the length of his films and the depth of his technical sophistication grew, Griffith realized the limits of film depended only on the director's vision. In a 1916 interview published in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Griffith said, "I may take another man's basic idea, but I must be permitted to develop it according to my own conceptions. This is my art . . . whatever poetry is in me must be worked out in actual practice; I must write it to my own standards."⁶⁶ Richard Schickel adds the

interesting comment that “there should, of course, have been quotation marks around the word ‘write,’ for what Griffith was saying in this first crude formulation of what would become the *auteur* theory, is that the director ‘writes’ on the set, with a camera; that what he does there constitutes true authorship in the cinema.”⁶⁷ The debate over the validity of the *auteur* theory will not be taken up at this point, but Schickel’s assertion of it here is accurate, for Griffith was the sole person responsible for what eventually made its way to the screen, by taken the authorial approach to his films from the beginning of production. As Blanche Sweet said, “Griffith was the whole show.” He never worked with a written script. Schickel is correct in stating that the term “write” should be qualified, in that certainly Griffith was using the term figuratively. Griffith’s use of the term “poetry” deserves equal qualification, but in a different sense. Emerson writes that “we are all lovers of rhyme and return, period and musical reflection.”⁶⁸ Griffith’s “cutback,” his parallel editing, echoes “rhyme and return”; indeed, it is the visual symbol for it. In terms of technique, the cinema is capable of, and relies on, visual “rhymes,” slant rhymes, assonant rhymes, in terms of visual repetition or a similarity of images in bracketed scenes, and in more formal terms, the cinema is capable of end stopped or enjambed lines, corresponding to editing techniques used to end a scene or sequence. Whether Griffith was consciously aware of himself as a “poet” of the cinema is not certain, but he did take much material for the hundreds of films he made for Biograph between 1908-1913 from poems. Indeed, in October 1908, as Griffith worked on *After Many Years* (his first of three film versions of Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden*), he proposed a scene that called for a pair of parallel shots. A Biograph executive asked Griffith, “How can you tell a story jumping about like that? The people won’t know what it’s about.” Griffith replied, “Well, doesn’t Dickens write that way?” “Yes,” said the executive, “but that’s Dickens; that’s

novel writing; that's different." Griffith answered, "Oh, not so much, these are picture stories; not so different."⁶⁹ Griffith realized that story elements could be connected across time and space as in the written novel; but his distinction of his work as "picture stories" is significant. Griffith implies here what he states more directly elsewhere, and in his later films: that the visual image has the same type of compression that the poetic line has, or at least more so than the prose novel has. Griffith's cinema uses similar transitional devices and parallel story lines, as in a Dickens novel, but the visual image is far more compact in its communicative possibilities. As a storyteller, Griffith is indeed in Dickens' debt; as film's first self-aware visual artist, he is closer to Emerson's poet, due to properties *inherent* in the motion picture medium itself: that is, the capacity for parallel editing, which lends rhythm and rhyme to scenes and sequences of motion pictures. And the motion picture will find its own pacing, its own rhythms according to the dictates of the story or message it is attempting to convey. Emerson writes in "Poetry and Imagination":

Poetry will never be a simple means, as when history or philosophy is rhymed, or laureate odes on state occasions are written. Itself must be its own end, or it is nothing. The difference between poetry and stock poetry is this, that in the latter the rhythm is given and the sense adapted to it; while in the former the sense dictates the rhythm. I might even say that the rhythm is there in the theme, thought, and image themselves. Ask the fact for the form. For a verse is not a vehicle to carry a sentence as a jewel is carried in a case: the verse must be alive, and inseparable from its contents, as the soul of man inspires and directs the body, and we measure the inspiration by the music. In reading prose, I am sensitive as soon as a sentence drags; but in poetry, as soon as one word drags. Ever as the thought mounts, the expression mounts. 'T is cumulative also; the poem is made up of lines of each of which fills the ear of the poet in its turn, so that mere synthesis produces a work quite superhuman.⁷⁰

Emerson's distinction between poetry and stock poetry is analogous to early filmic practices before 1908, when filmmakers / cameramen set the camera in one location and photographed

tableaux scenes in front of it (thus, the “rhythm is given, and the sense adapted to it”). Griffith began to move the camera as well as to move the filmed results in editing (thus, “the sense dictates the rhyme”). Vardac notes that “Griffith shifted his camera to shoot one or the other [actors] as the dramatic focus demanded. Where whole scenes had been the previous editorial unit, single shots were used here. The result was greater realism in the presentation of character and a more fluid cinematic continuity.”⁷¹ Vardac’s point about the single shot should be considered more deeply here. Before Griffith, films were shot to tell a story or demonstrate a spectacle from one perspective throughout; it might be said that early films were all shot in a single take. Griffith not only developed point of view as a rhetorical device in cinema, but concerned himself with the dramatic integrity and necessity of each shot; that is, his shots were motivated by the twofold demand of the story and the attempt at greater photographic and psychological realism. Vardac continues:

Griffith worked continually to increase graphic realism. It seems that every refinement in editorial technique was associated with this desire. In *Ramona* (Biograph, 1910), he combined the long shot with the full shot and the close-up. But at the same time the underlying significance of this development is that each type of shot was devoted to that special purpose which seemed “right” or real in view of the dramatic value of the particular scene being filmed. The vantage point of the camera was changed in the same way that an ideal spectator, wishing to gain a real view of the action without being distracted, would change his position. The technique of photography joins here with that of editing to cast off elements of conventionality and to attain a truer realism.⁷²

This sense of a scene’s *rightness*, to Griffith, is his own sense of its truth; this is the mind of the poet. Through the camera and the possibilities of editing, Griffith was able to act on what he knew innately, which Emerson stated: “Nature offers all her creatures to [the poet] as a picture-language.”⁷³ Griffith’s willingness to forego the conventionality of the times and shoot films with

a higher purpose in mind - - to determine truth in his films - - demonstrates what Emerson defines as the “intellect constructive”:

In the intellect constructive, which we properly designate by the word Genius, we observe the . . . balance of two elements The constructive intellect produces thoughts, sentences, poems, plans, designs, systems. It is the generation of the mind, the marriage of thought with nature. To genius must always go two gifts, the thought and the publication. The first is revelation, always a miracle It is the advent of truth into the world It seems, for the time, to inherit all that has yet existed, and to dictate to the unborn. It affects every thought of man, and goes to fashion every institution. But to make it available, it needs a vehicle or art by which it is conveyed to men. To be communicable, it must become picture or sensible object. We must learn the language of facts. The most wonderful inspirations die with their subject, if he has no hand to paint them to the senses. The ray of light passes invisible through space, and only when it falls on an object is it seen. . . . The relation between it and you, first makes you, the value of you, apparent to me. The rich, inventive genius of the painter must be smothered and lost for want of the power of drawing, and in our happy hours, we should be inexhaustible poets, if once we could break through the silence into adequate rhyme. As all men have some access to primary truth, so all have some art or power of communication in their head, but only in the artist does it descend into the hand.⁷⁴

The same technology for filmmaking was available to Griffith, but Griffith had the poet’s vision to bend the apparent world to his own sense of truth and beauty. Emerson writes, “The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity. A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world.”⁷⁵ Where Emerson writes of light in a figurative (and sometimes literal) sense, he intends, I think, to include corollary definitions: illumination, perception, revelation, clarity, exposure. Griffith realized, with the material apparatus of the motion picture, that he could manipulate light, point of view, perspective, and filmed images to determine visual symbols that were at once true (in the sense of recognizable, and thus real), and eternal (in the sense of representing a larger quality of the condition of humankind in the world). Emerson writes, “The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world.”⁷⁶ Griffith defines the scope of “visible creation” for his audience, and thus makes them aware of the

epitome, or the abstract, that is realized in the material forms he has chosen. This line of reasoning rests on the assumption - - true, I believe, to both Emerson and Griffith - - that there is a truth and beauty (the two terms conflated) beyond the visible world, awaiting the poet's touch, a truth that is timeless. Thus, Emerson quotes Plato: "Poetry comes nearer to the vital truth than history."⁷⁷ The key term of this line is *vital* history. Griffith, like Emerson, believed in a fundamental truth beyond the apparent world, and Griffith thought that through the motion picture apparatus he could make these truths available to the world. Lillian Gish recalls :

"Do you know," he would tell us, "we are playing to the world! What we film today will stir the hearts of the world - - and they will understand what we're saying. We've gone beyond Babel, beyond words. We've found a universal language - - a power that can make men brothers and end war forever. Remember that. Remember that, when you stand in front of a camera!"

To us, Mr. Griffith was the movie industry. It had been born in his head.⁷⁸

Notes

1. Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 29.
2. Ibid., 53.
3. Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1984), 93.
4. D. W. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood: The Autobiography of D. W. Griffith*. Ed. James Hart (Louisville, KY: Touchstone Publishing Company, 1972), 26.
5. Griffith, "Are Motion Pictures Destructive of Good Taste?," excerpted from *Arts and Decoration* (September 1923, 12-13, 79). In *Focus On D. W. Griffith*. Ed. Harry M. Geduld (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), 61.
6. Schickel, 24.
7. Ibid., 25.
8. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 43.
9. Ibid., 42.
10. Griffith, "Are Motion Pictures Destructive of Good Taste?," *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 62.
11. Griffith, "Films I Should Like to Make," excerpted from "The Motion Picture Today - - and Tomorrow," *Theatre XL* (October, 1927, 21, 58). *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 66.
12. Griffith, "Motion Pictures: The Miracle of Modern Photography," excerpted from *The Mentor* IX:6 (July 1, 1921, 3-12). *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 56.
13. Ibid., 57.
14. Griffith, "My Early Life," excerpted from Henry Gordon Stephen, "The Story of David Wark Griffith," *Photoplay X* (June 1916, 35, 37, 162-65). *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 20-21.
15. Griffith, "Youth, the Spirit of the Movies," excerpted from *Illustrated World XXXVI* (October, 1921, 194-96). *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 59.
16. Griffith, "My Early Life," 19.
17. May, 73.
18. Ibid., 71.

19. Schickel, 96.
20. Quoted in Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 71.
21. May, 61.
22. Griffith, "D. W. Griffith, Producer of the World's Biggest Picture: Interview with D. W. Griffith," excerpted from *New York American*, February 28, 1915, City Life and Dramatic section, 9. In *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 29.
23. Schickel, 33.
24. Quoted in May, 275 n. 29.
25. May, 72.
26. Stanley Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 11.
27. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 21.
28. Ibid., 22-23.
29. Ibid., 72-73.
30. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 30.
31. Emerson, *The Divinity School Address*, in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1971), 76-77.
32. Emerson, *Nature*, 29.
33. May, 72-73.
34. Linda Arvidson (Mrs. D. W. Griffith), *When the Movies Were Young* (New York: Dutton, 1925), 48.
35. Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 41.
36. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 102.

37. Gunning's "three levels of filmic discourse" are taken from the model of literary critic Gérard Genette, who focused expressly on narrative discourse. Gunning uses Genette's model, but modified to fit his own application to film narrative. Genette's system examines components of narrativization under the larger term "narrative discourse"; Gunning uses the term not to the ends of story analysis, as does Genette, but to determine the component processes of narrativizing a film text. Thus, Gunning's modified schema determines three aspects: *tense* (temporal relations between narrative discourse and story); *mood* (roughly analogous to point of view); and *voice* (the relation between narrative discourse and the act of narrating). *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, 15-16. It should be noted here that, while I find Gunning's distinction between the cinema of attraction and the cinema of narrative integration useful in determining Griffith's significance to the development of an art form, I do not agree with Genette's categories of narrativization, nor with their application in this context.

38. Gunning, 43.

39. Ibid., 70.

40. Quoted in Gunning, 72.

41. Gunning, 73.

42. Ernest Lindgren, *The Art of the Film* (New York: Collier Books, 1948), 58.

43. Schickel, 114.

44. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 86-87.

45. Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me*. With Ann Pinchot (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), 130.

46. Schickel, 26.

47. Ibid., 125.

48. Gish, 129-130.

49. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 116.

50. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 85-86.

51. Schickel, 114.

52. A. Nicholas Vardac, *Stage to Screen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 201-02.

53. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 81-82.

54. Ibid., 82.
55. Emerson, "Art," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 211.
56. Ibid.
57. Schickel, 139.
58. May, 74.
59. Ibid.
60. Griffith, "The Greatest Theatrical Force," excerpted from *Moving Picture World* LXXXV (March 26, 1927), 408. In *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 66.
61. Griffith, "Films I Should Like to Make." *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 66.
62. Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," 14. The original idea Cavell is attempting to clarify is the connection between Shakespeare's comedies of remarriage and Hollywood comedies in his book *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*.
63. Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 167.
64. Emerson, *Nature*, 18.
65. Griffith, "What I Demand of Movie Stars," excerpted from *Moving Picture Classic* III (February, 1917), 40-41, 68. In *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 52-53.
66. Schickel, 291.
67. Ibid.
68. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition volume VIII: Letters and Social Aims*. Ed. by Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), 46.
69. Arvidson, *When Movies Were Young*, 66.
70. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 54.
71. Vardac, 201.

72. Ibid., 203.

73. Emerson, "The Poet," 8.

74. Emerson, "The Intellect," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 198-99.

75. Emerson, *Nature*, 16.

76. Ibid., 22.

77. Ibid., 41.

78. Gish, 130.

Chapter 8

Intolerance and the Aesthetics of Redemption

Griffith used every technique he had developed and perfected in producing the most epic film to date, *The Birth of a Nation*, in 1915. While the film was a technical masterpiece, and gained wide critical and popular acclaim, the film's look at the Reconstruction period and the perceived tyranny of the North brought criticism upon the film as racist and historically inaccurate. The film project was very close to Griffith's heart; he grew up hearing tales of the war from his father about Southern heroism, the traditions of the grand old South, and Griffith knew first hand the devastation the war had caused in his own family, as well as the south as a whole. Material for Griffith's film came largely from Thomas Dixon's pro-South novels *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Clansman*; Griffith hoped to show the devastation of the South and the attempts of the Ku Klux Klan to protect antebellum Southern values. In short, Griffith did not set out to make a racist film, but the material from Dixon's novels, as well as Griffith's own southern heritage, cast a definite shadow over the film's second half that is hard to dismiss.

Dixon's novel *The Clansman* was transformed by Dixon into a stage production, which enjoyed some success. Griffith found in the novel, though, a subject close to his own experiences living in the south before and after the Civil War. Also, by pitting the southern Cameron family against the wrath of imposed Reconstruction as well as vengeful blacks, Griffith realized many opportunities for the kind of nineteenth century stage melodrama he so much admired. In his unfinished autobiography, Griffith wrote that "*The Birth of a Nation* . . . might be said to have caused the shotgun wedding of the stage and the movies."¹

The Birth of a Nation was, by far, the biggest motion picture spectacle to date. The film was twelve reels in length, twice the length of his two previous films, *Home Sweet Home* (1914) and *The Avenging Conscience* (1914). It represented the most complicated motion picture undertaking of the time. Also, the film represented Griffith's idea that the motion picture medium could be educational in as much as he wanted to tell the true story of the South during Reconstruction. The project was a personal one for him as well; he would be able to cast in flesh his father's stories of the war, his own family's tribulations, and his love for the antebellum South, which (of course) fell in line with the American Victorianism he still embraced.

The Birth of a Nation also had an impact on the changing status of the motion picture industry in America, which had been in various stages of reform since 1908, after the closure of all of New York's nickelodeons and store front theaters. Griffith's work at Biograph had helped to elevate the status of the motion picture, and the social reform movements operating in urban areas were uneasy about the recent increases in disposable income and free leisure time the industrial revolution was bringing to working class families. The New York reform group known as The Committee of Fourteen sought municipally supervised parks and amusements (the latter term included motion pictures), stating, "This is clean up, not close up."² Lary May writes:

Urban Progressives were uneasy about affluence, and worker alienation. They hoped to use this reoriented leisure realm as a place to restore American ideals in pure form. When trying to convince the population of the need for these measures, reformers turned to the movies. In act, film's very power for evil might be used for good. Because films were mass produced, they ran rampant all over the cities. But for the sane reasons, they could cut across the population and serve positive goals, provided they could be centrally regulated, before being sent out to the thousands of theaters around the country.³

As a result of the cooperation of various like-minded groups, the National Board of Review, the first national censorship board for the movies, was founded, “based on the voluntaristic tradition, and dedicated to protecting free speech.”⁴ May notes that, significantly,

Nearly all [Board members] were wealthy Protestants, with a few German Jews. Andrew Carnegie, Samuel Gompers, Shailer Mathews, and presidents of major universities sat on the main board, along with representatives from the Federal Council of Churches, the YMCA, the New York School Board, the Society for the Prevention of Crime headed by the most powerful vice crusader in the city, the Reverend Charles Parkhurst, and the moralistic Postal Inspector, Anthony Comstock. While this all-male panel presided, the actual viewing was done by 113 female volunteers from these agencies. In accordance with Victorian assumptions, men had the ultimate authority, but women were the moral guardians who enforced the code.⁵

However, as this board was voluntary and not acting as a state agency, they did not infringe on free speech. May cites that in October 1914, for example, “the Board reviewed 571 films, eliminated 75 scenes, 10 reels, and 3 entire movies.”⁶

By 1913 the motion picture industry was showing significant signs of change. Foreign films, usually associated with racy subjects, had dropped from fifty percent in 1908 to ten percent in 1913. Longer, better quality films were being made by American independent producers. May cites an investigation by the People’s Institute of New York City which showed that “laborers still comprised 70 percent of the 1912 audience; but 20 percent were now clerical workers and 5 percent were respectable bourgeois men and women.”⁷ Thus, “without losing the original audience of immigrants, then, the Protestant film makers and censors of comfortable Republican backgrounds had created a medium that cut across class, sex, and party lines”⁸; the investigation concluded that “movies were far and away ‘the most positive form of entertainment in the entire city.’”⁹ Representative of this new trend was Harry Aitken’s Triangle Company, with which Griffith would become associated for the production of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*;

Aitken's company was one of the first to secure the financial backing of Wall Street investors. One edition of Aitken's trade journal in 1915 called the motion pictures the "world's pulpit." The journal also included a cartoon, showing "Uncle Sam pointing to a movie theater and saying to 'Miss Liberty,' 'Now, there is a safe and sane amusement.'"¹⁰ Griffith had joined with Aitken's group for the realization of his Civil War epic. Griffith was obviously attracted to Aitken's Midwestern Protestant values and strict Victorianism. Indeed, *The Birth of a Nation* became the most acclaimed and financially successful film of the entire silent era, grossing over \$13 million, the highest gross for a single film before 1934.¹¹ *The Birth of a Nation* was, however, more than a "shotgun wedding of stage and screen"; it was, in a sense, the success of a new medium at the expense of the old, and, if this were indeed a marriage, it was one which produced a complex and troubled, yet savant offspring: *Intolerance*.

The controversy surrounding *The Birth of a Nation* concerned the film's portrayal of freed blacks after the Civil War. The various protests, beginning in New York and Boston but spreading eventually to every city where the film played, for the most part engaged Thomas Dixon, whose arguments in support of his books and play only fueled the fires of antagonism already strongly felt by social reformers as well as the NAACP. The film opened in New York's Liberty Theater on March 3, 1914, without the seal of approval from the National Board of Review. Frederic Howe, the chairman of the National Board of Review, had been "severely disquieted" by the film at a February pre-screening for the Board's members; he was said to have wanted the entire second half of the film banned.¹² The Board ultimately decided to reserve judgment on the film until it had seen a re-edited version promised by Griffith. Griffith's re-edited version of the film excluded only two scenes, a love scene between Senator Stoneman and his

mulatto mistress and a scene of a black and a white engaged in a fight.¹³ However, in an honest effort to assuage the controversy, Griffith added a new “preface” to the film:

A PLEA FOR THE ART OF THE MOTION PICTURE

We do not fear censorship, for we have no wish to offend with improprieties or obscenities, but we do demand, as a right, the liberty to show the dark side of wrong, that we may illuminate the bright side of virtue - - the same liberty that is conceded to the art of the written word - - that art to which we owe the Bible and the works of Shakespeare.¹⁴

In spite of open protest against the film’s portrayal of blacks, *The Birth of a Nation* ran for 48 weeks at the Liberty;¹⁵ it has been estimated that 825,000 people in the New York area alone saw the film in its first run.¹⁶ After opening to theaters around the country, the film played to larger audiences and more positive reviews, while at the same time engendering more protests, court battles, and legal maneuvering to have the film edited and/or banned outright in some areas. Indeed, in many cities the film was edited by local theater owners, sometimes under the order of law, usually resulting in the cutting of scenes deemed objectionable (most often, the attempted rape scene and the one in which the attempt to force Lillian Gish into marriage with a mulatto is shown).¹⁷ The NAACP protested the film in every city in which the newly-formed organization had an establishment. After the film’s New York run, it moved to Boston, where the initial protest outside the theater resulted in a riot. There was a march, two thousand strong, on the Massachusetts capitol, which resulted in more cuts in the film. There was an organized, and peaceful, protest in Washington D.C., where it was known that President Woodrow Wilson, a Southern Democrat and school friend of Thomas Dixon, had seen and approved the film without reserve.

Finally, in New York, the National Board of Review approved the film, although not unanimously. The cuts in the film were not nearly so deep as Griffith and Dixon had expected. Lary May writes that “the film generated such a fierce controversy that it practically crippled the National Board of Review, and shattered the consensus of the reformers who had hailed the movie as a beneficial medium.”¹⁸ Frederic Howe was so incensed over the controversy that he resigned as chairman and as a member of the Board. Schickel notes that, though the film faced some “sobering” legal challenges, “it took time and money to pursue appeals of these matters through the courts, though eventually the movie prevailed, if often in truncated form, just about everywhere.”¹⁹ Griffith had steered clear of most of the troubles surrounding his film, though he did respond in the press by defending his film on the grounds of historical accuracy, his conscious attempt at a non-generalization of blacks (as he stated, none of his previous works had been anti-black, a comment which shifted even more responsibility for the film’s content onto Dixon), and the film’s aesthetic value. The latter was probably foremost in Griffith’s mind. Schickel observes:

Thanks to his dignified and high-minded conduct in this controversy, no great harm was done to Griffith’s reputation. On the contrary, it helped make him a truly national figure, a name known at last outside the confines of the movie business. And the financial success of the film gave him the ability to command, for the next decade, his own fate - - to make the pictures he wanted to make, in any manner he chose to employ, at whatever cost.²⁰

The success - - and controversy - - would indeed allow Griffith the money, time, and facilities to make his next, even longer film. Its theme was inspired, at least in part, by the aggressive stance taken against *The Birth of a Nation*; Griffith began to imagine the greatest evil of mankind to be man’s intolerance to man, and he saw it in repeating patterns throughout history.

Lillian Gish recalls:

The word “intolerance” became the title and the theme of his new film. Many writers have expressed the belief that Mr. Griffith realized the great harm that he had done by producing *The Birth of a Nation* and that *Intolerance* was his apology for it. Such statements are completely untrue. He did not consider his film harmful at all. He told what he believed to be the truth about the Civil War, as he had heard it from those who had lived through the conflict. He had no reason to apologize for his film. *Intolerance*, on the contrary, was his way of answering those who, in his view, were the bigots.²¹

Griffith had, in 1914, shot footage for a short film he titled *The Mother and the Law*, a story of a labor / management dispute but was dissatisfied with the results. After the success of *The Birth of a Nation*, he knew he could produce an even greater spectacle, although he was still interested in his short film. He recast *The Mother and the Law*, reshot some footage, and thought of ways to incorporate the scenes into his new film. Indeed, most of the eighteen months the film was in production, it was known as *The Mother and the Law*. Griffith kept his plans for the new film to himself, as usual, but his employees were under the impression that the stories that would make up *Intolerance* were separate projects. Griffith had assigned them separate production numbers: F-1 for *The Mother and the Law*, F-2, F-3, and F-4 (the “F” standing for “Feature”).²²

Amazingly, Griffith did not have a script, or even a shooting plan, for *Intolerance*. This was not unusual because he never worked with a script, but on a project the scale of *Intolerance* it seems almost impossible. Lillian Gish recalls that even the plans for the massive sets were never properly drawn up: “The sets were constructed without the benefit of a single architectural plan; the only blueprints were in Mr. Griffith’s head.”²³ Schickel adds that

on the stage [Griffith] was approachable but carried with him always that slight air of isolation from which his authority derived. He always lunched alone, studying the notes he had made for the afternoon’s shooting; then he would arise, put the notes - - all the script he ever had - - in his pocket and never refer to them again.²⁴

No one was sure of Griffith's intent for the four stories, and it is unclear just when Griffith came upon the idea of intertwining the narratives. Almost certainly he was influenced by the Italian epic *Cabiria* (dir. Giovanni Pastrone) and wanted to create an American epic of equal (if not surpassing) style and magnitude. He already had *The Mother and the Law* as part of his film; assistant cameraman Karl Brown recalls that the Judean story was considered "surefire" when it became production F-4; Schickel notes that it was a well-known industry ploy to include a Passion Play to justify, or shore up, a production.²⁵ However, I suspect that Griffith had more sincere motives, given his background and beliefs; a director of his stature would have no need to "[haul] the Christ figure on to. . . [the] screen to provide a morally edifying climax for whatever nonsense was going on," as Schickel suggests.²⁶ If Griffith's Christ apparitions in *The Avenging Conscience* or at the end of *The Birth of a Nation* seem a bit sentimental, they were no doubt sincere to Griffith. The idea behind these images, which reappear at the end of *Intolerance*, reflects Emerson's observation that "there is a soul at the centre of nature, and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe."²⁷ For Griffith this sentiment is inevitable and eternal. What drew Griffith to the French segment, the St. Bartholomew's Massacre, is still unclear, though the premeditated slaughter of French Protestants engineered by Catherine de Medici does fit with the theme of the film. As the film progressed, Griffith shot footage of the actors and stages he had available. Most likely he shot the French story and the Judean story while waiting for the massive Babylon sets to be finished. Shooting the modern story (as *The Mother and the Law* came to be known) was no great difficulty, since Griffith was reworking, albeit certainly with considerably more skill and attention, material he already knew well. Thus,

he was able to enjoy the production process with an autonomy and financial security he had not known before. Schickel writes that

despite the vastness of his enterprise, he was actually working as few moviemakers ever have, that is to say as a novelist or a poet does, with his general theme sketched in but with the creative centers of his intelligence, and his freely associating, freely roaming unconscious responding to it with stroke after stroke of apt improvisation. His film was growing as a work of art should - - not by filling in an outline, but organically, taking on a shape dictated mainly by its own inner necessities.²⁸

Griffith had always obeyed his conscience while working - - as his habit of filming without a script suggests - - but *Intolerance*, the process and the final film, reveals that he was working by intuition, which he no doubt had even more confidence in after *The Birth of a Nation*'s success. Indeed, overhearing someone on the set wonder aloud if this film, which no one had any clear idea of anyway, would ever end, Griffith commented, "I don't see why everyone is in such a hurry to get through. We'd only start another one."²⁹

Griffith's unique position while working on *Intolerance* - - no time or budget constraints, autonomy over story, camera, and set decisions - - allowed his mind to build the film as it *revealed* itself to him. This is reminiscent of Emerson's commentary on genius:

The thought of genius is spontaneous; but the power of picture or expression, in the most enriched and flowing nature, implies a mixture of will, a certain control over the spontaneous states, without which no production is possible. It is a conversion of all nature into the rhetoric of thought, under the eye of judgement, with a strenuous exercise of choice. And yet the imaginative vocabulary seems to be spontaneous also. It does not flow from experience only or mainly, but from a richer source. Not by any conscious imitation of particular forms are the grand strokes of the painter executed, but by repairing to the fountain-head of all forms in his mind.³⁰

Since there is no way to tell how much film Griffith originally shot for each segment of the film, it is difficult to establish a predetermined scheme for the production. In fact, as has been suggested, it seems likely that Griffith had no formal plan in mind, but composed the film in his mind as it

occurred. *The Birth of a Nation* was, for Griffith, a personal project; he said that “Hollywood seemed to rather like it, but I think that that picture owes more to my father than it does to me.”³¹

However, with *Intolerance*, he had a purpose, a higher calling. Not only was Griffith trying to top his own accomplishments, he was avenging himself (and the nation, he believed) for the “meddling” of the “busybody” social reformers’ attack on *The Birth of a Nation*, and he was fighting for the legitimacy of - - and the protection of - - motion pictures themselves. Schickel notes that

in 1916 . . . there were no fewer than five motion picture censorship bills under consideration by the House of Representatives’ Education Committee. . . . Around the same time the Crestman-Wheeler Bill, establishing a state commission to be appointed by the Board of Regents (supervisors of higher education), to censor movies, actually passed both houses of the New York legislature and in the spring and awaited a decision to sign or to veto by Governor Charles S. Whitman, who ultimately decided against it, perhaps responding to strong editorial opposition . . . and heavy lobbying by the film industry, in which Griffith took a very active part³²

In fact, it was at this time that Griffith published a pamphlet titled “The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America,” in which he argued passionately for the protection of films under the first amendment, using such subheadings as “Why Censor the Motion Picture - - The Laboring Man’s University?” and “Intolerance: The Root of All Censorship.”³³ Griffith published the pamphlet himself, and noted in the preface that “this book is not copyrighted. The press is invited to freely use its contents.”³⁴ He makes some startling, and very interesting, arguments in his pamphlet.

Early in the work he states:

The truths of history today are restricted to the limited few attending our colleges and universities; the motion picture can carry these truths to the entire world, without cost, while at the same time bringing diversion to the masses.

As tolerance would thus be compelled to give way before knowledge and as the deadly monotony of the cheerless existence of millions would be brightened by this new art, two of

the chief causes making war possible would be removed. The motion picture is war's greatest antidote.³⁵

Given the ending of *The Birth of a Nation*, in which the image of Christ reunites the divided nation and stops all hostilities, and the conclusion of *Intolerance*, in which a band of angels accompanies a transformation of prisons into fields of flowers, terminates all fighting in a scene depicting modern war, and announces the arrival of the millennium, it seems as though Griffith is arguing for film itself as the redeemer of mankind. He continues:

Ours is a government of free speech and a free press.
Intelligent opposition to censorship in the beginning would have nipped the evil in the bud.
But the malignant pygmy has matured into a Caliban.
Muzzle the "Movies" and defeat the educational purpose of this graphic art.
Censorship demands of the picture makers a sugar-coated and false version of life's truths.
The moving picture is simply the pictorial press.
The pictorial press claims the same constitutional freedom as the printed press.³⁶

Griffith claims the motion picture as a graphic equivalent to the printed press, suggesting that films are the equivalent of literature, capable of providing "life's truths." This is a substantial claim for a medium that was, only eight years earlier, renowned chiefly for its novelty and its lurid subject matter. But Griffith's strongest - - and most alarming argument - - comes next:

The right of free speech has cost centuries upon centuries of untold sufferings and agonies; it has cost rivers of blood; it has taken as its toll uncounted fields littered with the carcasses of human beings . . . The Revolution itself was a fight in this direction - - for the God-given, beautiful idea of free speech.

Afterwards the first assault on the right of free speech, guaranteed by the constitution, occurred in 1798, when Congress passed the Sedition Law, *which made it a crime for any newspaper or other printed publication to criticize the government.*

Partisan prosecution of editors and publishers took place at the instance of the party in power, and popular indignation was aroused against this abridgement of liberty to such an extent that Thomas Jefferson, the candidate of the opposition party for president, was triumphantly elected. And after that nothing more was heard of the Sedition Law, which expired by limitation in 1801.

The integrity of free speech and publication was *not again attacked* seriously in this country until the arrival of the *motion picture*, when this new art was seized by the powers of intolerance as an excuse for an assault on our liberties.³⁷

This is a powerful accusation, coming from a filmmaker with a chip on his shoulder about the agitation aroused by *The Birth of a Nation*, but also from a humanist who could foresee the dangerous precedent which would be set by censoring motion pictures. Griffith's attack is not personal, but patriotic (if in a sentimental vein) and indignant about the educational and moral potential of film. Griffith's cinema is centered around what Emerson calls 'the moral sentiment.' Griffith is interested in uplifting all humankind through the educational and moral possibilities of the new art because he saw that the cinema as a more powerful tool for dissemination of knowledge - - *the* most powerful tool yet invented - - and that it thus had a responsibility to the masses to furnish them with truth and beauty: the first had to do with the moral sentiment (the spiritual aspect of cinema), and the second with aesthetics (the formal aspect of cinema), which, of course are inseparable, both in Griffith's view as well as in Emerson's. Early Christian film critic Vachel Lindsay might have had Griffith in mind when he wrote, on November 1, 1915: "It has come then, this new weapon of men, and the face of the whole earth changes. In after centuries its beginning will be indeed remembered. It has come, this new weapon of men, and by faith and a study of the signs we proclaim that it will go on in immemorial wonder."³⁸

After the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith was asked by an interviewer to comment on what makes a man great. Griffith's response in part was:

Beauty's the answer. Beauty is my fetish. I don't care what anyone says to the contrary. Beauty is what every human being is searching for. . . . Beauty is the one road to righteousness. . . . War is hideous, but it can be made the background for beauty, beauty of idea.³⁹

Thus, Griffith's motivation for making *Intolerance* seems very nearly altruistic; he had no real interest in money, but he did have a message to deliver, and he had command of the largest world stage on which to project that message. It is a situation few artists have enjoyed, and Griffith's vision for the film was grand indeed, far more so than historicizing the Reconstruction; this film was conceived to change the social relations of the world, and to cause a revolution for eternal peace. William Drew writes that "Griffith's interpretation of history blends the cyclical with the progressive. While believing that history repeats itself, he also feels that each turn of the wheel can bring humanity closer to the ideal, a conception embedded in the Modern story and the millennial [sic] epilogue."⁴⁰ Griffith's view resembles Emerson's, and will indeed be explicated fully at the end of *Intolerance*. Griffith was sincere in his faith in his medium, his message, and his cast and crew. In the *Christian Science Monitor*, he commented on the possibilities of film:

Cinematography has become an integral part of our social life. We are just beginning to discover its possibilities, and the time will come when the importance of the motion picture will not be expressed in terms of amusement but in units of constructive educational welfare accomplished by its means.⁴¹

Such was the headiness, and perhaps the overoptimism, of Griffith's prospects of the future. By the time he began *Intolerance*, in 1915, he had been making films for seven years, and though the industry had grown considerably, there is little to suggest that the medium of itself would gravitate toward educational uplift. Thus, much was riding on the success of *Intolerance*; a success would affirm Griffith's optimism about the motion picture's future, as well as allow him the time and money to construct more elaborate films. Moreover, though he *intended* no harm in his version of the antebellum south and the rise of the Klan (this fact is *not* in doubt), Griffith was aware of the damage perceived by various groups by *The Birth of a Nation*, and he seems intent

on demonstrating his goodwill by attacking intolerance as a disease of the human condition, and one which can be overturned. Vachel Lindsay wrote, in 1922, of *Intolerance*:

In *Intolerance*, Griffith hurls nation at nation, race at race, century against century, and his camera is not only a telescope across the plains of Babylon, but across the ages. Griffith is, in *Intolerance*, the ungrammatical Byron of the films, and since he is the first of his kind I, for one, am willing to name him with Marlowe.⁴²

Griffith's intercut narratives justify the subtitles of the film's two "acts": "Love's Struggle Through the Ages" and "A Sun Play of the Ages." Griffith emphasizes from the beginning the timeless quality of the affliction he is attacking.

Tom Gunning has noted how well Griffith's development of the "narrator system" serves his means. He describes it, in part: "Parallel editing to build suspense and contrast, cutting-in to articulate the drama and create empathy with characters, and the allegorical structuring of images became cornerstones of the narrator system."⁴³ Gunning further notes how effectively the narrator system replaces the early "off screen" film lecturer of previous years, and cued the audience's response to the images they were seeing:

The narrator system . . . not only involves strategies to make the narrative legible, but it also provides the psychological motivation and more complex characterization that the new, more sophisticated narratives demanded. Furthermore, the narrator system created an intervening narrator who comments on the action of the film through the form of the film itself. Through techniques such as suspense editing and the use of the cut-in, Griffith's filmic style itself emphasized "parts of beauty and power" (as *Moving Picture World* had asked the lecturer to do), while directly involving the spectator in the unfolding of the story. This narrator was not located off-screen, but was absorbed into the arrangement of the images themselves. The narrator system seems to "read" the images to the audience in the very act of presenting them. The narrator is invisible, revealing its presence only by the way the images are revealed on the screen.⁴⁴

Griffith, as director, serves as the "narrator" in this sense (and thus the *auteur*), by directing the audience's attention and manipulating its emotive involvement with the film and its characters and

events. The significance of this development in film history cannot be overstated; indeed, it is this system that distinguishes “amusements” (in the sense of pre-1908 movies) from works of art. The system of narration is especially important in *Intolerance*, in which the audience is asked to follow the trajectories of four narratives, shown out of temporal order, and thus be expected to connect the four stories through a central theme rather than an unfolding of events in historical time. In 1916, there had been no precedent set for this procedure, save for previous films by Griffith. *Intolerance* would present a challenge to audiences’ ability to follow the film’s events and make the symbolic connections to reveal its theme. Gunning describes the effect of parallel editing in this way:

Parallel editing, like the continuous movement of the chase format, maintains a linearity of action. But by developing two trajectories of action at the same time and intercutting them, it complicates this simple linearity through filmic discourse. The progress of each line of action is interrupted, and therefore delayed, by the progress of the other, manifesting the narrative arrangement of tense. The order of shots no longer indicates a simple succession in time, but the staggered progress of simultaneity.⁴⁵

Film time is, generally speaking, *abstracted* from historical time, and it is most likely true that movie audiences by 1916 had come to realize this, and had accepted the fact that films told stories in a world comprised of its own time (that is, time dictated by the narrative) rather than in *real* time. This acceptance is a result of the narrator system Gunning describes; before Griffith’s arrival, films were most often shot and projected in real time; the exception to this would be an insert shot, or a trick shot, added for a novel effect. For *Intolerance*, Griffith had to insure that his audiences would be able to follow the four stories unfolding in *their own* time, rather in simultaneous time with the other stories. Instead of the (comparatively) simpler device of parallel editing which connected separate events occurring in the same narrative, *Intolerance* would show

four separate stories - - in effect, four separate films - - requiring the audience to maintain an awareness of the events taking place in, for example, the Modern story while it was seeing the French story. The stories do unfold in historical time, parallel to each other; however, they are not *connected through* historical time. The audience must realize the central theme in each story, and recognize it as the same theme that connects all four stories. For this, Griffith provided an abstracted image to illustrate the connection: Lillian Gish as the “Eternal Mother,” rocking the flower-laden cradle, the figure emphasized by a shaft of sunlight, while the three Fates huddle in the background of the scene; this shot is, throughout the film, underscored with the title (occasionally with addendum), “Out of the cradle, endlessly rocking.” Griffith relied heavily on this image to connect the disparate elements of his film, and its success has been the subject of debate for more than eighty years.

Lillian Gish’s memories of the film are probably the most reliable, as she had very little work to do, and was thus free to observe and to learn. She writes:

My role as the Eternal Mother took less than an hour to film. Nevertheless, I was closer to *Intolerance* than anyone else except Billy Bitzer and Jimmy Smith, the cutter. I felt there was more of me in this picture than in any other I had ever played in. Perhaps because I wasn’t acting a long role, Mr. Griffith took me into his confidence as never before, talking over scene before he filmed them, having me watch all the rushes, even accepting some of my ideas. He sent me to the darkroom to pick the best takes and to help Jimmy with the cutting. At night, as I watched the day’s rushes, I saw the film take shape and marveled at what Mr. Griffith was creating.⁴⁶

This suggests that the film was coming together as it was being filmed and cut, that Griffith’s film was indeed finding its own form; Griffith’s process in making *Intolerance* seems to embody

Emerson’s statement, “Ask the fact for the form.” Gish continues:

The true power and magnificence of *Intolerance* came not from its size but from the cutting and editing of the negative. Mr. Griffith worked on every foot of film, slicing each scene to

the core of its drama, joining the sequences in amazing harmony. . . . Each story was in itself a miracle of parallel action and cross-cutting. In the swift, overpowering climax, the four stories mingled in “one mighty river of emotion,” to use his own words.⁴⁷

Griffith’s “river of emotion” displaces the film’s climax from rational aesthetic choices. Though the film’s final images were certainly chosen by Griffith, they are motivated not by narrative or formal necessity, but by intuition. The ahistorical synthesis of stories only coalesces in the end through inspired imagery. Pierre Baudry writes in *Cahiers du Cinema*:

DWG’s film is the scene of a *tension* between the heterogeneity of its fictional material and the rationality which fuses and unifies it. That is why the unity of the work is not to be found in the four episodes by themselves, but in that which presides over their union: one may say that *Intolerance* is a film *on* history; the principal effect of the intertwining is to attribute to each of the episodes a partial stamp of which the totality of the film is none other than the commentary.⁴⁸

Again, Griffith’s *fact* finds its *form*. But Griffith also demonstrates Emerson’s law “that the thing uttered in words is not therefore affirmed. It must affirm itself, or no forms of logic or of oath can give it evidence. The sentence must also contain its own apology for being spoken.”⁴⁹ The images of Christ and redemption that follow *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* not only are expressions of Griffith’s optimism, but also serve to reassure the viewer that the possibility of redemption exists. Griffith held that the possibility for good was contained in everyone; in this way, Griffith’s world view resembles Emerson’s: there is no ‘evil’ in and of itself, but only a lack of good (or *beauty*). Thus, the global redemption Griffith imagines is the enlightenment of all to a single truth. Griffith attacks systems as evil - - social reformers (in the guise of the “Vestal Virgins of Uplift”), capitalist factory owners, the north’s plan for southern reconstruction, the greed of priests for political power: seldom does a single individual come under Griffith’s attack. Indeed, his films often appear as allegories, with his characters appropriately identified by type

and not proper names - - the Dear One, the Boy, Brown Eyes, the Musketeer of the Slums, the Friendless One, the Mountain Girl, the Rhapsode, Princess Beloved, the Mighty Man of Valor, and the Nazarene (for Christ) - - so that the stories deliver moral instruction by example. At the end, all are made aware of the possibility of redemption. This conception would not be possible without some sense of spiritual unity, which can be determined in Griffith's films by Emerson's identification of the Over-Soul:

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. Only by the vision of that Wisdom can the horoscope of the ages be read.⁵⁰

While researching the character of Catherine de Medici for *Intolerance*, Lillian Gish expressed her inability to understand her actions; Griffith told her, "Don't judge. Just be thankful it isn't you committing some black deed. Always remember this, Miss Lillian - - Circumstances make people what they are. Everyone is capable of the lowest and the highest. The same potentialities are in us all - - only circumstances make the difference."⁵¹ Griffith, like Emerson, realized that every *one* represents the *whole*; for Griffith, as he shows in the Modern story of *Intolerance*, circumstances indeed determine behavior (but, notably, do not preclude the chance for redemption). The consciousness that allows for choice is vulnerable to the 'evils' Griffith perceives - - social reformers, unfeeling capitalists labor bosses - - but this choice is a condition of the Fall, that event which separated man from the unity of God. In Griffith's film-ending

“redemption” scenes, this unity is restored. For Emerson, too, the “instruments” of our culture are suspect:

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. Nature, art, persons, letters, religions, - - objects, successively tumble in, and God is but one of its ideas. Nature and literature are subjective phenomena; every evil and every good thing is a shadow we cast. . . . People forget that it is the eye which makes the horizon, and the rounding mind's eye which makes this or that man a type or representative of humanity with the name of hero or saint.⁵²

The mediation to which Emerson refers is, of course, language, with which Griffith did not have to concern himself. However, Griffith still had to communicate through visual symbols, and thus Emerson's expressed anxiety over subject/object duplicity is indeed a concern for Griffith.

Emerson's “instruments” are Griffith's corrupt social institutions; and, as Emerson suggests, these “instruments” have a creative power of their own. It is this power, this “rapaciousness” that Griffith expresses as the dangers in his films and, only through redemption, are we ultimately saved. Over this very point is much Griffith criticism derailed; that is, the tendency to read Griffith's films not as allegories, but as historical narratives. Thus it is possible for a critic and theorist of no less stature than Sergei Eisenstein to find the Eternal Mother symbol insufficient to unite *Intolerance's* disparate stories, and audiences and critics since have found the ending scenes of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* to be sentimental and artistically pretentious.

The ending sequences from both films, as derived from prepared continuity scripts, read as follows. *The Birth of a Nation* is a historical narrative; Griffith, however, utilizes parallel action to heighten tensions until there is no reconciliation in the rational world, and thus can only bring

about resolution through the romanticized, *idealized*, apparitions ushering in the millennium in America.⁵³

- 1600: TITLE:⁵⁴ The Aftermath
 At the sea's edge, the double honeymoon.
- 1601: MLS: *on the left, Margaret and Phil are seated on a couch in an interior space. Behind them in back projection is a seascape at sunset.*
- 1602: Fade in. MS: *Ben and Elsie are seated on a bluff overlooking the sea. He turns to her.*
- 1603: TITLE: Dare we dream of a golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more.
 But instead - - the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace.
- 1604: LS: *the God of War, projected in the background, is mounted on a horse and with both hands is swinging his sword above his head. On the right, in front of him, lies a huge heap of dead bodies, and on the left a crowd writhes and pleads with him. The image of the God of War fades out.*
- 1605: LS: *the figure of Christ, projected in the background, holds out his arms above a crowd of dancing and promenading people dressed in heavenly garments. The image of the crowd fades, and the Christ figure remains with his arms outstretched. The scene of the happy, talking throng fades in again, and the Christ figure fades away.*
- 1606: Fade in: MS: *as in 1602. Ben and Elsie look out to sea, as the breeze blows against their faces.*
- 1607: LS: *the Heavenly throng continues to walk about and dance. Projected in a space in the background, a celestial city can be seen. Fade out.*
- 1608: MS: *split frame. On the right, Ben and Elsie hold hands and look at each other lovingly. They turn and look left, to the vision of the celestial city on a hill.*
- 1609: Fade in. TITLE: “Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!” *Fade out.*
- 1610: Fade in. TITLE: THE BIRTH OF A NATION or “The Clansman”
 THE END

For *Intolerance*, the ending must reconcile four stories of conflict, and though the stories are “historical” (excluding the Modern story), they nonetheless function as allegories. Thus, the redemption sequence is longer and more complex. In view of the film’s grander sense of

spectacle, the ending indeed matches that which has come before, and its implications are more pronounced, extending into the future as well as reconciling the past:⁵⁵

TITLE: When the cannon and prison bars wrought in the fire of intolerance - -

- 1694: EXTREME LONG SHOT OF SYMBOLIC SCENE OF MODERN BATTLEFIELD -
 guns firing, storm clouds moving above - flashes of lightning - two lines charge -
 meet in battle -
- 1695: MEDIUM LONG SHOT (circle vignette) OF HAND TO HAND FIGHTING -
- 1696: MEDIUM LONG SHOT (oval vignette - flattened on bottom) OF A MODERN
 MORTAR FIRING -
 a futuristic tank moving behind it -
- 1697: EXTREME LONG SHOT (top corners rounded) OF BOMBING OF A GREAT CITY -
 airships in the sky - buildings below being shelled and exploding - (a double
 exposure effect) - the skyscrapers of N. Y. above with airships in the sky - (bottom
 of screen masked) - a model of city buildings exposed upon - shells, explosions,
 and ruin below -
- 1698: LONG SHOT (sides round) OF ROWS OF PRISONERS IN LONG CORRIDOR
 SHAKING THEIR FISTS AT PRISON WALL - R.
- 1699: THE BATTLEFIELD - AS 1694 -
 beams of light come out of the sky above - white robed angels, figures of peace,
 appear in the sky.
- 1700: AS 1695 -
 men fighting - one man in the foreground about to stab fallen foe, stops, holds his
 rifle up in the air -
- 1701: LONG SHOT OF THE SKY -
 more angels are appearing row after row, in the sunset sky. (about 75 figures - as
 Italian double-decker painting) -

TITLE: And perfect love shall bring peace forevermore.

- 1702: AS 1700 -
 the man in the foreground on the battlefield looking up drops his rifle. (others too)
- 1703: THE SYMBOLICAL SCENE - AS 1699 -
 the battlefield with the figure in the sky above - the men stop fighting, drop their
 rifles.
- 1704: (fade in) MEDIUM SHOT (corners soft) OF GROUP OF HAPPY PEOPLE IN AIRSHIP
 - (a girl is dropping weights from airship - is at lever)

(fade out)

1705: LONG SHOT OF AIRSHIP FLYING THROUGH THE CLOUDS FILLED WITH GAY PEOPLE.

TITLE: Instead of prison walls - - bloom flowery fields.

1706: LONG SHOT OF MODEL OF PRISON -
 beams of light descend upon it.

1707: (fade in) LONG SHOT OF ROW OF PRISONERS SHAKING FISTS AT WALL -
 they rush forward "thru" the wall - (trick effect) -

1708: EXTERIOR OF A PRISON - AS 1706 -
 dissolves into

1709: LONG SHOT (oval vignette) OF FLOWERY FIELD -
 mountains in the distance -

1710: LONG SHOT (bottom of a slanting vignette - it opens wider) OF A GROUP OF HAPPY PEOPLE IN THE FIELDS -

 Negro workers in the foreground - clouds in the sky -

1711: EXTREME LONG SHOT OF BATTLEFIELD -
 the mortar below is now quiet- the figures in the sky above.

1712: LONG SHOT OF GROUP OF HAPPY PEOPLE WANDERING ABOUT GRASSY FIELDS -

 a gun 1. Is covered with flowers - 2 children in the foreground -

1713: SEMI-CLOSE UP (sides round) OF LITTLE BOY AND GIRL (about 5 years) -
 he puts a flower in her hair - she takes it out and blows a kiss to him - she laughs
 and gives him a playful push - he hugs her.

1714: AS 1712 -
 the people in the fields.

1715: THE BATTLEFIELD - AS 1703 -
 the soldiers below cheering and happy - the figures in the sky above - the white
 cross of light superimposed over the scene becomes brighter -

1716: MEDIUM SHOT (closer view than before) OF THE GIRL ROCKING THE CRADLE - -
 (fade out)
 THE END

Sentimental as these scenes may be, they are to be understood as symbols, and to Griffith they were the only possible endings to *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* - - for how else can the complications of these two films be resolved, if not through a symbolic act of God? Griffith has unleashed his full "bag of tricks" for *Intolerance*; his use of the iris effect had reached its most extreme form, in that Griffith could utilize any shape and movement he wanted, allowing him to

specifically move the viewer's eye to maximum effect. His use of close ups had become more sophisticated - - the most often cited example is of Mae Marsh's hands, wringing, during her husband's trial in the Modern story, and Griffith's cutting back to close ups of her face and her eyes, but there are many like examples: the Mountain Girl's affection for Belshazzar, the Dear One's pained observance of happy couples with children after her own child has been taken away. Bitzer's camera work further adds to the tension. Though the term "deep focus" had yet to be coined, and would be more closely associated with Orson Welles and Gregg Tolland, Bitzer accomplishes the effect while shooting the battles atop the walls of Babylon. Shooting outdoors under bright sunlight, Bitzer was able to stop down his lens enough so that the battles in the foreground as well as the skirmishes below and the continual onslaught of troops advancing are all in focus. Griffith's cutting, especially in the final two reels, correlates the stories to achieve the highest tension possible; as the Dear One races to intercept the Governor with a pardon for her husband even as he is being fitted for the noose in the Modern story, the Mountain Girl's wild ride to warn Belshazzar of the coming Persian attack in the Babylon story and the struggle of Christ bearing his cross on the way to Golgotha in the Judean story are all intercut, so that each "ride" becomes infused with the tensions of the others; the effect is cumulative. Griffith's cutting increases the tempo dramatically in the final reel of the film; the scenes become progressively shorter and the titles, used profusely to this point, become more and more sparse. From shot number 1376, in which The Friendless One confesses to the murder of the Musketeer of the Slums, through shot number 1692, in which the Boy, saved, steps off the gallows, 23 minutes and 41 seconds of film time pass on screen.⁵⁶ This section of the film, halfway through Reel 11, marks the beginning of Griffith's flowing together of the four stories into "one mighty river of emotion."

The climax of the film, 335 separate shots, contains only 27 titles, 9 shots of the cradle rocking and, while still featuring extended battle scenes on the walls of Babylon and the prolonged crucifixion scene, the average shot length is 4.19 seconds per shot. (By comparison, Reel 6, roughly the middle of the film, contains 840.06 feet of film and 112 separate shots, an on screen average of 7.5 seconds per shot).⁵⁷

It is important, however, to be mindful of the condition of the film as it was released. Lewis Jacobs writes that “the photography for the picture consumed 300,000 feet of negative.”⁵⁸ Lillian Gish recalls that the footage shot for *Intolerance* ran “into hundreds of reels,” which Griffith, “without note or script,” finished editing in twenty months (the delay was due to a number of other films he was overseeing; Gish estimates he could have finished in six months if he were undistracted).⁵⁹ Kevin Brownlow writes that “running the dailies, Griffith would work out, simply by intuition, by the feel of the scene, where the close-ups should go - - and where he should hit emotional climaxes. The blocking-in process was over; the master now added the rich details.”⁶⁰

Lillian Gish further recalls:

When Mr. Griffith finished editing *Intolerance*, it ran approximately eight hours. He planned to exhibit it in two parts, each a four-hour section, on two consecutive nights.

The dimensions of this film have never been equaled. When the exhibitors who were going to show *Intolerance* heard of its length they refused to handle it, and by that time they were in a position to dictate what they would or would not book. Although Mr. Griffith had ignored similar objections when he introduced the two-, four-, five-, and twelve-reel films, this time, unfortunately, he listened.

He was advised to cut the film to one evening's entertainment. He should have ignored the advice. His own instinct was right. Success, *Intolerance* was his monument, the measure of the man himself. But the exhibitors won. The public was never shown *Intolerance* in its entirety.⁶¹

Preparing the film for release was difficult in many ways. Anita Loos was assigned the task of titling the film:

Griffith summoned [her] to his side one summer's afternoon, and asked [her] to return to the studio that night to view a first cut of the picture. She believed she was the first person, aside from Griffith, ever to see a fully assembled version of *Intolerance*, and she recalls thinking, when the lights in his projection room came on at the end, that "D. W. had lost his mind." She added: "I sat there a moment in stony silence, which I could only explain to the Great Man by telling him that I had been moved beyond words. Actually, he was so absorbed in his film I doubt he realized my bewilderment."⁶²

In regard to the Judean story, which exists in the final film as only three tableaux, William Drew writes:

Griffith presents only one of Christ's miracles - - the transformation of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana - - thereby asserting his belief in the celebration of life which runs counter to the forces of repression and bigotry. So pointed was Griffith's portrayal of Christ's crucifixion as the consequence of the Jewish puritanical orthodoxy that Howard Gaye, who played Christ, claims that the Jewish authorities in Los Angeles, sensitive to cinematic depictions of the life of Christ, persuaded Griffith to cut the Judean story from thirty episodes to six prior to the film's release.⁶³

Intolerance opened at the Liberty Theater in New York on September 5, 1916. The film opened to mixed reviews; Lewis Jacobs writes that "many critics of the day were bewildered by the cutting style, could not follow the story from period to period, and were confused by the 'interminable battle scenes' and the recurring 'mother rocking her baby.'"⁶⁴ "The fault of *Intolerance*," Jacobs writes, "is what Julian Johnson, reviewing the film for *Photoplay*, was the first to comment upon: 'The fatal error of *Intolerance* was that in the great Babylonian scenes you didn't care which side won. It was just a great show.'"⁶⁵ Schickel notes that the anonymous critic for the *New York Times* commented that Griffith was "'a real wizard of lens and screen.' And despite the film's 'utter incoherence, the questionable taste of some of its scenes and the cheap banalities into which it sometimes lapses' it was judged 'an interesting and unusual picture.'"⁶⁶

Alexander Woollcott, writing later in the *Times*, also offered a mixed review and, as Schickel notes, “the damage was done After opening week, most considerations of *Intolerance* would labor under the necessity of countering reviews of this mixed and hesitant character.”⁶⁷ The film did receive some favorable commentary, however. Schickel notes that “the review in the *Boston Evening Transcript* . . . was obviously designed to assuage fears that the new picture might prove ‘too difficult’ for the humble movie audience, as well as to answer the doubts of earlier critics.”⁶⁸ And Vachel Lindsay, writing for the *New Republic*, offered his support, and most probably identified the core problem with the film’s reception. Schickel comments, “as usual with Lindsay, his poet’s intuition served him well in evaluating Griffith’s work, in finding in it certain qualities that were not apparent to those who, as Lindsay said, were incapable of estimating a film ‘in any but a nickelodeon way.’”⁶⁹ Schickel offers the most reasonable explanation for the film’s failure:

It caused its stir in that small, still-forming community that was serious about the artistic potential of film, and that group’s interest radiated outward into those circles in which being culturally *au courant* is a significant value. But once they had seen it, there was no breakthrough to the larger audience, which breakthroughs tend to be based, not on promotion, advertising or reviews, but on word of mouth, which, in turn, is usually based on developing a strong sense of identification between the people of the screen story and the people of the audience. . . . The large audience was not so much confused as distanced by the director’s work.⁷⁰

Schickel’s recent estimation, combined with Vachel Lindsay’s contemporary view, suggests that Griffith had made a film too far in advance of his audience’s ability to understand its full significance. While viewers easily identified with the well-drawn characters and situations (for better or worse) in *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*’s allegorical stature escaped audiences which were engaged by the Modern story and the spectacle of Babylon, but little else. Lillian Gish recalls a letter she received from Griffith, in which he stated, “I don’t know where to go or

where to turn since my great failure.” She writes, “He told me sadly of wandering through darkened theaters, barking his shins on empty seats.”⁷¹ Still she maintains that

in the shortened version, the film’s images fell on [the audience] like spent buckshot, without force or direction. I think it is important to remember that the world never saw *Intolerance* as Mr. Griffith wanted it seen. I believe that, had he shown the film in two four-hour screenings as he had planned, it would have been successful.⁷²

In the released version of the film, the Judean story had been reduced to three tableaux: the miracle at Cana, the incident of the woman taken in adultery, and the Crucifixion. Moreover, Schickel accurately observes, “as for the French story, it has a truncated feeling about it, as if, perhaps, Griffith shot more of it than survived the final cut.”⁷³ Certainly, it is not necessarily the brevity of the French story that is wanting, but the underdevelopment of its characters and theme. Griffith lavished the most screen time on the Babylonian story and the Modern story, perhaps for obvious reasons. If indeed he did cut more than four hours from his *intended* version of the film, he cut the more remote sequences to concentrate on the most engaging - - the Modern story, its facts taken from several accounts currently in newspapers and with which the audience would be familiar (the excitement of the rescue scene at its end is still one of cinema’s strongest); and the Babylonian spectacle, far too expensive *and* expansive to be shelved. William Drew offers another reason why Griffith might have chosen to preserve the Modern and Babylonian stories:

Griffith . . . uses the narrative structure to compare ancient Babylon and modern America. He sees a similar attitude toward courtship and marriage, drawing analogies between the Babylonian custom of selling women paraded on an auction-block to be judged by potential husbands and the modern American way in which women parade “like peacocks up and down the street in order to attract men.” Even the Dear One dons a tight skirt, hoping that “maybe everyone will like me too.” By showing Belshazzar intervening in behalf of the people, the director implies that there was greater concern for the common welfare in Babylon than in modern America with its impersonality, detached legal system and a social order that lacks the leadership to control the actions of Jenkins. Griffith’s indictment of official morality in America is particularly cogent in his comparison of the treatment of

prostitutes; in the Modern Story, prostitutes are dragged off to jail, but in Babylon, the tradition of temple prostitution makes “women corresponding to our street outcasts, for life, the wards of Church and State.”⁷⁴

Drew’s point is well taken; Griffith certainly preferred the morality expected of civilized Victorians, rather than the State sponsored morality imposed by social reformers, such as demonstrated by the elder Miss Jenkins in the Modern story, whose brother is a wealthy capitalist and financially supports the “Vestal Virgins of Uplift.” A title in the Modern story, in which Miss Jenkins speaks to her husband, reads, “We must have laws to make people good.”⁷⁵ Similarly, in the “marriage market” scene in Babylon in which the Mountain Girl is on display, Griffith inserts this title: “The Girl’s turn - perhaps not so different from the modern way.”⁷⁶ And, in creating a transition from the Modern story to the Judean story, Griffith joins a shot of Miss Jenkins with a shot of a group of Pharisees with the title, “Equally intolerant hypocrites of another age.”⁷⁷

The film as it exists today is shorter still than the release print, by almost 2000 feet. The Museum of Modern Art assembled its best possible print prior to 1940 from bits taken from still existing prints; much of the film had deteriorated and been destroyed or lost. Since the film had been a financial failure, Griffith had no interest in spending money on its continued preservation. In 1919, without making a duplicate negative, Griffith cut into the original negative to compile two shorter films, *The Fall of Babylon* and *The Mother and the Law*. And, since there is no written record of the film’s original continuity (as noted, Griffith never shot with a script), it is impossible to know where the missing 1889 feet of film would fit, or what scenes were lost.⁷⁸

It is no doubt that the film’s reputation has suffered somewhat over the years because of the lack of a complete print (or even a complete continuity script). However, the film has suffered as well from Sergei Eisenstein’s widely read 1944 essay “Dickens, Griffith, and The Film Today.”

Many critics still read this essay as a sort of baseline reference for Griffith commentary. Richard Schickel is correct in noting “the Marxist - - and chauvinistic - - underpinnings of his argument.”⁷⁹ Griffith’s debt to Dickens is beyond doubt. Eisenstein writes, regarding Dickens, that “from Dickens, from the Victorian novel, stem the first shoots of American film esthetic, forever linked with the name of David Wark Griffith.”⁸⁰ He continues:

Although at first glance this may not seem surprising, it does appear incompatible with our traditional concepts of cinematography, in particular with those associated in our minds with the American cinema. Factually, however, this relationship is organic, and the “genetic” line of descent is quite consistent.⁸¹

Eisenstein goes on to trace Griffith’s interest in Dickens, the “ocular” quality of Dickens’ prose, and Griffith’s original wish to become a novelist or playwright. However, later in the essay, he makes the mistake of dismissing, out of hand, a significant influence on Griffith’s work:

I must regretfully put aside Walt Whitman’s huge montage conception. It must be stated that Griffith did not continue the Whitman *montage tradition* (in spite of the Whitman lines on “out of the cradle endlessly rocking,” which served Griffith unsuccessfully as a refrain shot for his *Intolerance*).⁸²

Eisenstein claims that Griffith did not continue Whitman’s montage tradition because it is not in Eisenstein’s interest, as a critic writing a theory of montage to serve the Soviet state’s purposes, to do so. Yet many of the claims Eisenstein makes about Dickens’ writing in regard to Griffith apply to Whitman’s writing as well. Eisenstein’s intentions for the essay are clear early on:

We know the inseparable link between the cinema and the industrial development of America. We know how production, art, and literature reflect the capitalist breadth and construction of the United States of America. And we also know that American capitalism finds its sharpest and most expressive reflection in the American cinema.

But what possible identity is there between this Moloch of modern industry, with its dizzying tempo of cities and subways, its roar of competition, its hurricane of stock market transactions on the one hand, and . . . the peaceful, patriarchal Victorian London of Dickens’ novels on the other?⁸³

Eisenstein's contempt for American life is obvious and, even though the connections between Dickens and Griffith have been established already (and had been before 1944), it pleases Eisenstein more to associate Griffith's work with Dickens' social awareness rather than with the "Moloch of modern industry" that America represents. Eisenstein spends the next two pages of his essay on the ills of capitalist America before returning to Griffith's appreciation of Dickens and his connection to "Small-Town" America. Eisenstein never mentions (if he even knew) that though Griffith had read Dickens, what he knew of Victorianism he learned at first hand growing up in the American south before the Civil War. This connection is not difficult to make, but it is difficult to build an argument around, specifically one to the detriment of other influences from Griffith's own environment.

Griffith knew Whitman's work well; his choice of Whitman's lines for *Intolerance* was no accident. Lillian Gish remembers that

because the four stories were so widely separated in time and geography, Mr. Griffith decided to tie the episodes together with an image of the Eternal Mother rocking the cradle, accompanied by Walt Whitman's line, "Out of the cradle, endlessly rocking." Mr. Griffith loved Whitman; he could quote pages of his poetry. . . . The film was to open with this image, which would be repeated to introduce each of the four currents.⁸⁴

Eisenstein connects Griffith to Dickens in terms of technique and a shared feeling for the human condition, especially that of the oppressed and down trodden. Whitman is rich in these latter images, and in their juxtaposition with images of the upper class (as a cursory reading through "Song of Myself" will demonstrate). In a familiar passage of section 15, Whitman writes:

The bride unrumples her white dress, the minute-hand of the clock moves slowly,
The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open'd lips,
The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths not jeer you;)

The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the great Secretaries,
On the piazza walk three matrons stately and friendly with twined arms . . . (In 303-309)⁸⁵

It is easy to see Eisenstein's recognition of this as a "montage conception"; however, he never states *why* he must put aside Whitman's montage conception, though the reason seems obvious: Whitman's "Song of Myself" reveals the poet's optimism for the promise of democracy; clearly, this is not in Eisenstein's interest. Indeed, though he notes: "I wish to recall what David Wark Griffith himself represented to us, the young Soviet film-makers of the 'twenties. To say it simply and without equivocation: a revelation,"⁸⁶ he credits Griffith with introducing the *possibility* of montage, which the Soviets soon equaled and extended for their own ideological purposes. Thus, Dickens inspires Griffith with his Victorianism and his prose style; Griffith takes Dickens' style and utilizes it to create parallel action for the cinema; the Soviets utilize Griffith's parallel editing to create the *montage trope* - - and here is the crux of Eisenstein's argument. He writes:

Our heightened curiosity of those years in construction and method swiftly discerned wherein lay the most powerful affective factors in this great American's films. This was in a hitherto unfamiliar province, bearing a name that was familiar to us, not in the field of art, but in that of engineering and electrical apparatus, first touching art in its most advanced section - - in cinematography. This province, this method, this principle of building and construction was *montage*.⁸⁷

He continues:

But montage thinking is inseparable from the general content of thinking as a whole. The structure that is reflected in the concept of Griffith montage is the structure of bourgeois society. . . . And this society, perceived *only as a contrast between the haves and the have-nots*, is reflected in the consciousness of Griffith no deeper than the image of an intricate race between two parallel lines. . . .

. . . the montage concept of Griffith, as a primarily parallel montage, appears to be a copy of his dualistic picture of the world, running in two parallel lines of poor and rich towards some hypothetical "reconciliation" where . . . the parallel lines would cross, that is, in that infinity, just as inaccessible as that "reconciliation."

Thus it was to be expected that our concept of montage had to be born from an entirely different “image” of an understanding of phenomena, which was opened to us by a world-view both monistic and dialectic.

For us the microcosm of montage had to be understood as a unity, which in the inner stress of contradictions is halved, in order to be re-assembled in a new unity on a new plane, qualitatively higher, its imagery newly perceived.⁸⁸

This is Eisenstein’s criticism of Griffith, that he does not go far enough with the possibilities of montage, and is satisfied to simply contrast one line of action with another. But Griffith’s use of editing reveals more complexity than Eisenstein admits to; he credits Griffith as a master of *parallel montage*,⁸⁹ but this assumes that Griffith’s images - - in *any* film (Eisenstein is writing of theory, not specific works) - - never extend beyond their compared meaning on the screen. But, for example, Eisenstein does not acknowledge the sequence in *Intolerance* when, as the Dear One’s baby is taken by force from her by Miss Jenkins, Griffith fades in a single medium long shot of Christ in the center of a crowd, with the title “Suffer Little Children” superimposed on the image; in the next shot, children crowd in around Christ; then Griffith irises out, and in the next shot irises in on a shot of the Jenkins Foundation, with the women carrying the Dear One’s baby inside.⁹⁰ Certainly the juxtaposition of the insensitive reformers with Christ creates a different, “higher” conception of the intensity of emotion felt by the mother at her loss. Had Griffith wished for comparative action, he could have simply contrasted the actions of the reformers with the misery of the mother; however, through the insert of the shot of Christ surrounded by children, the resulting idea is a qualitative, not quantitative change. This is true, as well, near the film’s climax, at which point the Judge’s sentence against the Boy is pronounced in the title “The verdict - - GUILTY! Universal justice - - an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth; a murder for a murder.”⁹¹ Three shots later after fading out of the courtroom and fading in to a scene in the Judean story,

the title reads, “Outside the Roman Judgement Hall, after the verdict of Pontius Pilate: “Let him be crucified.”⁹² The resulting emotion, suggested by the comparison, is pity for the innocent Boy, but not (as might be otherwise) for a man wrongly convicted, but for a human life as valuable as the life of Christ, conversely implying the symbolic significance of Christ’s execution. Again, here, the difference is qualitative; the quality of our response to the Boy’s condition is affected by the juxtaposition of the Christ scene. Furthermore, given the theme of the film, the two sequences from *Intolerance* demonstrate another of Eisenstein’s qualifications: organic unity.⁹³ So, do these sequences not fall within the limits of Eisenstein’s constructive montage?

And here begins Eisenstein’s principal critique of Griffith and boast of the Soviet cinema:

For only a new social structure [i.e., Soviet], which has forever freed art from narrowly commercial tasks, can give full realization to the dreams of advanced and penetrating Americans!

To the parallelism and alternating close-ups of America we offer the contrast of uniting these in fusion; the MONTAGE TROPE.

. . . Griffith’s cinema does not know this type of montage construction. His close-ups create atmosphere, outline traits of the characters, alternate in dialogues of the leading characters, and close-ups of the chaser and the chased speed up the tempo of the chase. But Griffith at all times remains on a level of representation and objectivity and nowhere does he try through the juxtaposition of shots to shape and import image.

However, within the practice of Griffith there was such an attempt, an attempt of huge dimensions - - *Intolerance*.⁹⁴

This brings Eisenstein to his criticism of Griffith and his use of Whitman:

Out of [Griffith’s misunderstanding of montage] came his unsuccessful use of the repeated refrain shot: Lillian Gish rocking a cradle. Griffith had been inspired to translate these lines of Walt Whitman,

. . . endlessly rocks the cradle, Uniter of Here and Hereafter

not in structure, nor in *the harmonic recurrence of montage expressiveness*, but in *an isolated picture*, with the result that the cradle could not possibly be *abstracted into an image of eternally reborn epochs* and remained inevitably simply a *life-like cradle*, calling forth derision, surprise, or vexation in the spectator.⁹⁵

To begin, reading the image of the Eternal Mother rocking the cradle as anything but symbolic seems almost impossible. The shot is described in Theodore Huff's continuity script as follows:

Scene 1 MEDIUM LONG SHOT OF SYMBOLICAL SCENE

a girl with long golden hair rocking a large cradle covered with roses - strong beam of light comes from above on her - in the left background the three Fates sit huddled together - the scene smokey and hazy - edges softened - tinted blue.⁹⁶

This shot is repeated in just this way - - with the exception of its final appearance, in the last reel of the film - - throughout *Intolerance*. In fact, this identical shot appears twenty times in the film, and the shot is always *motivated*. The cradle shot almost always begins or ends a sequence of the Modern story, and is thus more closely associated with that story than the other three. A significant variation on the cradle shot appears in reel 6: in shot number 625a, the preceding title reads, "Out of the cradle - endlessly rocking. Baby fingers hopefully lifted"; the shot is a close up of the Dear One's baby in a cradle; the title "The little wife, now a mother, plans for the day of Daddy's return" follows; and shot number 626 is a close up, in a circle vignette, of the baby's hand clasping the finger of its mother.⁹⁷ In the established cradle shot, a baby is never seen; this scene suggests this baby, the child of the Boy and the Dear One, represents future generations and the hope of redemption. Griffith repeats the cradle shot more frequently in the final three reels of the film, where it appears four times in each reel;⁹⁸ as the stories begin to flow together, and the tempo increases, Griffith's repeating of the cradle shot emphasizes the significance of events - - especially for the Boy. In shot number 1652, Griffith shows the Boy in a medium shot being led

to the scaffold, accompanied by a priest; shot 1653 is an extreme long shot of the Crucifixion of Christ, which remains on screen for 37 ½ seconds; shot 1654 is a medium long shot of the car carrying the wife and the Governor's pardon; and shot 1655 is a long shot of the gallows, rounded vignette, as the Boy is led in.⁹⁹ In four shots, Griffith associates the execution of the innocent Boy with the Crucifixion of Christ. There is the obvious anxiety regarding the arrival of the Governor's pardon; but there is an underlying implication that if the Boy is hanged, Christ's sacrifice will be meaningless. The Boy's rescue assures the hope of redemption, the significance of Christ's sacrifice, and thus extends the hope of the future against intolerance for the couple's baby. Significantly, the next very instance the cradle shot appears is the last shot of the film (number 1716), and POV is varied; it is closer than before. Thus, contrary to Eisenstein's view, the cradle shot *is indeed* implicated in the structure of the film, not as an isolated shot, but as a meaningful unit of symbolic significance. The shot is an abstraction; the personages in the shot are representatives of an *idea*. A very carefully staged realistic shot, repeated *twenty times* identically, would have no justification for its existence, and I believe Eisenstein would grant Griffith more awareness than to repeat pointlessly a meaningless shot.

Perhaps the most telling criticisms in Eisenstein's argument come in his evaluation of how Griffith "failed" with *Intolerance*. He writes:

The four episodes chosen by Griffith are actually un-collatable. The *formal failure* of their mingling in a *single image* of *Intolerance* is only a *reflection of a thematic and ideological error*.¹⁰⁰

. . . the secret of this [failure] is not professional-technical, but ideological-intellectual.¹⁰¹

The question of montage imagery is based on a definite structure and system of thinking; it derives and has been derived only through collective consciousness, appearing as a

reflection of a new (socialist) stage of human society and as a thinking result of ideal and philosophic education, inseparably connected with the social structure of that society.¹⁰²

. . . the parallel *race of the ice-break* [in *Way Down East*] and of *the human actions* are nowhere brought together by him in a unified image of “*a human flood*,” a mass of people bursting their fetters, a mass of people rushing onward in an all-shattering inundation, as there is, for example, in the finale of *Mother*, by Gorky - Zarkhi - Pudovkin.¹⁰³

The flaw with Eisenstein’s criticisms here, especially in the last instance, is that he fails to take into account *the fact that Griffith is not a Soviet filmmaker*. D. W. Griffith was not a socialist, nor did he make films to fit the schema of a particular state ideology. It is almost as though Eisenstein is condemning Griffith for not making Soviet films. Griffith was, like Whitman, a prophet for the promise of democracy through union. This is best expressed by Vachel Lindsay, writing in 1915:

We must have Whitmanesque scenarios, based on moods akin to that of the poem *By Blue Ontario’s Shore*. The possibility of showing the entire American population its own face in the Mirror Screen has at last come. Whitman brought the idea of democracy to our sophisticated literati, but did not persuade the democracy itself to read his democratic poems. Sooner or later the kinetoscope will do what he could not, bring the nobler side of the equality idea to the people who are so crassly equal.¹⁰⁴

Lindsay’s call reads like no less than an Emersonian plea for Griffith’s *Intolerance*.

Notes

1. D. W. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*. Ed. James Hart (Louisville, KY: Touchstone Publishing Company, 1972), 97.
2. Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 52.
3. Ibid., 52.
4. Ibid., 54.
5. Ibid., 54-55.
6. Ibid., 55.
7. Ibid., 66.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 65-66.
11. Ibid., 67.
12. Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1984), 272.
13. Ibid., 282.
14. Quoted in Schickel, 282.
15. Ibid., 277.
16. Ibid., 280.
17. Ibid., 286.
18. May, 82.
19. Schickel, 297.
20. Ibid., 300.

21. Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me*. With Ann Pinchot (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 165.
22. Schickel, 306.
23. Gish, 169.
24. Schickel, 316-17.
25. Ibid., 309.
26. Ibid.
27. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Spiritual Laws," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 81.
28. Schickel, 317.
29. Ibid., 317.
30. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Intellect," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 199.
31. Griffith, 26.
32. Schickel, 304.
33. Griffith, *The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America*, in *Focus on D. W. Griffith*. Ed. Harry M. Geduld (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 43.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 44.
38. Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Liveright, 1970), 317.
39. Schickel, 290.
40. William M. Drew, *D. W. Griffith's Intolerance: Its Genesis and its Vision* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1986), 62.

41. Schickel, 290.
42. Lindsay, 11.
43. Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 81.
44. Ibid., 93.
45. Ibid., 103.
46. Gish, 177.
47. Ibid., 178.
48. Quoted in Drew, 18.
49. Emerson, "Spiritual Laws," 89.
50. Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 160.
51. Gish, 168.
52. Emerson, "Experience," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume III: Essays: Second Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 43-44.
53. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*. Continuity script. Ed. Robert Lang (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 155-56.
54. The format is as follows: the number in the left column represents the shot number; the next heading is the shot description (TITLE; MS: medium shot; MLS: medium long shot; LS: long shot); next, to the right and below, is the content or action of the shot.
55. Griffith, *Intolerance: The Film by David Wark Griffith: Shot by Shot Analysis*. Prepared by Theodore Huff (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 153-55.
56. The projection rate for the film is 16 frames per second.
57. This information is compiled from Theodore Huff's shot by shot analysis of *Intolerance*, prepared from the Museum of Modern Art's print of the film. The MOMA print runs 11,811 feet, as compared to the original 13,700. Huff's continuity, prepared in 1966, suffers from several discrepancies, including 47 unmeasured shots and totals only 10,669 feet. Though my figures come from measured shots, these facts should nonetheless be taken into account.

58. Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Teacher's College Press, Columbia University, 1969), 188-89.

59. Gish, 178.

60. Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By . . .* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 90.

61. Gish, 179.

62. Schickel, 330.

63. Drew, 36.

64. Jacobs, 200.

65. Ibid.

66. Schickel, 332.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid., 333.

69. Ibid.

70. Schickel, 334-35.

71. Gish, 180.

72. Ibid.

73. Schickel, 314.

74. Drew, 28-29.

75. *Intolerance*, Reel 1, shot 36.

76. *Intolerance*, Reel 3, shot 294.

77. *Intolerance*, Reel 5, shot 514.

78. According to Theodore Huff's continuity, there is quite noticeably less film contained on Reels 4, 7 and 12. It might be surmised that the missing footage came from these reels, but because of the film's intercut stories, it is impossible to draw any speculation as to what story elements may have been lost.

79. Schickel, 335.
80. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Ed. and Trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1949), 195.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid., 231.
83. Ibid., 196.
84. Gish, 166-67.
85. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass: Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), 43.
86. Eisenstein, 201.
87. Ibid., 204.
88. Ibid., 234-36.
89. Ibid., 234.
90. *Intolerance*, Reel 7, shots 682-684.
91. Roughly halfway through the film, in shot number 720, Griffith repeats the title "An eye for an eye!" as Catherine de Medici oversees the slaughter of the Huguenots. *Intolerance*, Reel 7, shot 720.
92. *Intolerance*, Reel 10, shots 1237 - 1240.
93. Eisenstein, 235.
94. Ibid., 240.
95. Ibid., 241.
96. *Intolerance*, Reel 1, shot 1.
97. Ibid., Reel 6, shots 625a - 626.
98. The cradle shot appears once in each of the first two reels; twice in reel 3; does not appear in reels 4, 5 and 6; once in reel 7; does not appear in reel 8; twice in reel 9; once in reel 10; and four times each in reels 11, 12 and 13.

99. *Intolerance*, Reel 13, shots 1652 - 1655.

100. Eisenstein, 243.

101. *Ibid.*, 244.

102. *Ibid.*, 245.

103. *Ibid.*, 253.

104. Lindsay, 93-94.

Chapter 9

An Emersonian Representative: Chaplin, or the Filmmaker

When Charles Chaplin began directing films for Keystone in 1913, Griffith had already released his landmark four reeler *Judith of Bethulia*. By the time Chaplin had made 20 more short comedies for Sennett (and thus completed the terms of his Keystone contract), Griffith had released *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith had already elevated the motion picture to the status of an emerging art form, extending its potential past that of mere “amusement.” Chaplin would accomplish the same for the film comedy in the span of the ten years he spent making short films for, respectively, Keystone, Essanay, Mutual, and First National Film companies. Chaplin’s affect on the medium was as influential as Griffith’s; Chaplin’s comedies attained an element of pathos, sophistication, and beauty that had not been seen before, and has rarely been matched since.

Like Griffith, Charles Chaplin came to the motion picture business from the theater; however, Chaplin’s training had begun in the English music halls of the late nineteenth century. His parents were both veterans of the music halls, his father being something of a star in his day. By the time of Chaplin’s birth, Charles Sr. had deserted the family and Hannah Chaplin, his mother, suffered bouts of mental instability which led to frequent hospitalization. Young Chaplin spent most of his time alone, hungry, and scraping for work. Though as a child he was enrolled for brief periods in local schools, he had no formal education (Chaplin biographer David Robinson writes that, even at fourteen years of age, Chaplin was once relieved by the fact that at an audition he did not have to read script on the spot because “he found it very difficult to make out words on the page”).¹ Through his mother’s influence Chaplin was acquainted with many music hall performers, and Chaplin began his performing career with the Eight Lancashire Lads, a comedy and clogging

ensemble, in 1898, at age 9. This began as well Chaplin's formal stage training, and under the most difficult of conditions. Robinson writes:

Even to a ten-year-old in a troupe of clog dancers, the music hall of those times must have provided an incomparable schooling in method, technique, and discipline. A music hall act had to seize and hold its audience and make its mark within a very limited time - - between six and sixteen minutes. The audience was not indulgent, and the competition was relentless.²

Chaplin's gift for pantomime was evident from the beginning of the time he spent around the music hall stages with his mother, where actors and managers noticed him. Chaplin recalled in a 1918 interview:

If it had not been for my mother I doubt I could have made a success of pantomime. She was one of the greatest pantomime artists I have ever seen. She would sit for hours at a window, looking down on the people on the street and illustrating with her hands, eyes, and facial expression just what was going on below. All the time, she would deliver a running fire of comment. And it was through watching and listening to her that I learned not only how to express my emotions with my hands and face, but also how to observe and study people.³

Chaplin's music hall career not only kept him temporarily fed, but provided him with an education he would make use of throughout his career; training in the skill of pantomime would prove essential to Chaplin's film success. Chaplin's gift of expression and invention were inculcated from his mother, but the art of pantomime was necessary for the English stage at the time:

Pantomime, in the more general sense, was stimulated by the licensing laws of the eighteenth century which forbade dialogue except on the stages of the two Theatres Royal. Hence the unlicensed theatres developed styles of wordless spectacle, with music and mime to explain the plot. These entertainments became so popular at Sadler's Wells and the Royal Circus, that the Theatres Royal in Covent Garden and Drury Lane were obliged to adopt the genre themselves for afterpieces. In the music halls, the prohibition of dialogue lingered much longer, and so in consequence did the mime sketches.⁴

Chaplin's young life was a chaos of poverty and squalor; after leaving the Eight Lancashire Lads, acting jobs were low paying and infrequent. Eventually he came to the notice of impresario Fred

Karno, who in 1908 offered the nineteen year old Chaplin a position with Fred Karno's Speechless Comedians, who were "the supreme [company] of their time. They were the conjecture and end of several traditions of English pantomime."⁵ Fred Karno was "heir to all these traditions; in turn he contributed his own gifts for organization, for invention, for spotting and training talent, for *mise-en-scène* and direction."⁶ Karno's influence on Chaplin would prove inestimable in later years.

Chaplin first arrived in the United States as a member of the Karno Touring Company in 1910, where he gained American notice for his role as a drunk in the burlesque titled *Mumming Birds*. He came to America for a second Karno US tour in 1912, and received further critical praise for his performances. It was during this tour that Mack Sennett and Mabel Normand saw the Karno show in New York and inquired about the comic. This time, Chaplin's American success, as well as his reluctance to return to the poverty of his life in England, encouraged him to leave Fred Karno and sign a single-year contract to join Mack Sennett's Keystone Film Company, initially as a support player, on December 16, 1913.

Chaplin didn't step into uncharted cinema waters, as Griffith had in 1908 at Biograph. However, Chaplin's arrival at the Keystone facility was something less than auspicious. Chaplin was, and remained throughout his life, an extremely shy and reticent man. When he arrived in Los Angeles, he took a room near the studio, located in Edendale. For two days he approached the facility, and both days found himself too intimidated to enter. Finally, he was cajoled by Sennett to come inside the studio and begin work. As James Agee has written, "Mack Sennett made two kinds of comedy: parody laced with slapstick, and plain slapstick."⁷ The Keystone films were far from sophisticated. Sennett had learned his craft from Griffith, but most effectively utilized

Griffith's editing style for the purpose of increasing the pacing of his chase sequences to dizzying speeds; Sennett cared little for education or aesthetics. The Keystone cameramen were "dexterous in following the free flight of the clowns, and the dynamism of 'Keystone editing,' adapted from Griffith's innovatory montage techniques, soon became a byword."⁸ David Robinson writes that "the stuff of [Keystone] comedy was wild caricature of ordinary joys and terrors of daily life. At all events, the guiding principle at Keystone was to keep things moving, to leave no pause for breath or critical reflection. No excess of make-up or mugging was too great."⁹ Sennett explained the Keystone formula to Chaplin: "We get an idea, then follow the natural sequence of events until it leads to up to a chase which is the essence of our comedy."¹⁰ Chaplin had been accustomed to the months of rehearsals and discipline of perfecting the Karno routines; the Keystone style must have seemed bewildering. In fact, Sennett did not use Chaplin at all for the first month of his contract; Chaplin watched the productions and tried to accustom himself to their pace. Robinson describes the typical Keystone shooting scheme:

Whatever the plan of the film, the director would restrict himself to no more than ten camera set-ups - - a moving camera was practically unknown at Keystone. So far as possible all the material required in each set-up was filmed together: the ingenuity of a Keystone film lay in making, with as little waste as possible, a collection of shots which would join neatly together in the cutting room to make a coherent narrative. The usual number of shots for a one-reel film was between fifty and sixty. (Sennett did not recognize the principle of retakes - - material once shot had to be used).¹¹

Clearly the plan for assembling the narrative through editing derived directly from Griffith; the fast pacing, little time for rehearsal (if any), and zero-waste policy all confirm the place comedy held in the cinema of 1914. The motion picture medium itself was only recently gaining recognition as something more than an amusement (and this largely due to Griffith and foreign films, especially Italian spectacles, that were flooding into the US). If critics had been dubious about Griffith's

work as inconsequential, even as he was shooting films from poems by Tennyson and Browning, the pure knockabout of Sennett's Keystone Kops was beneath critical contempt. Agee writes, "‘Nice’ people, who shunned all movies in the early days, condemned the Sennett comedies as vulgar and naive. But Millions of less pretentious people loved their sincerity and sweetness, their wild-animal innocence and glorious vitality."¹² For Chaplin, whose comedic talents had at least been recognized as part of a legitimate British stage tradition, the move to motion pictures at first seemed a mistake. However, he decided to stay - - certainly the \$150.00 per week he was getting from Sennett, as opposed to the \$60.00 he earned touring with Karno's number two company, influenced his decision; Chaplin was always aware of his close proximity to poverty, and guarded against it all his life. As François Truffaut insightfully suggests, "filmmakers before and after him described hunger, but if he did it better, it is perhaps because he knew more about it! When Chaplin started making chase films at the Keystone Studios, he ran faster and farther than his colleagues simply because his life depended on it."¹³

Chaplin eventually was doled out small parts in Keystone films; he acted in ten films, and it was the tenth film, *Mabel at the Wheel*, that provided an unexpected opportunity for Chaplin. He played opposite Mabel Normand, who had co-written the scenario and was co-directing with Sennett, and though the two were friends, Chaplin took exception when Normand casually brushed aside a bit of business Chaplin recommended. After much argument between Chaplin, Normand and Sennett, during which Chaplin explained his opposition, stating, '*This was my work*,' he agreed to finish the film but announced that he was ready to begin directing his own films. In order to do so, he put up \$1500 insurance (all the money he had saved in California - - a considerable risk) if the film failed. Sennett reluctantly agreed. Thus Chaplin was allowed, with

much misgiving, to write and direct his first short, *Caught in the Rain*, in May 1914. The film proved to be a huge success for Keystone, and except for the feature *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (directed by Sennett), he directed all his remaining films at Keystone.¹⁴

In describing the nature of Shakespeare's genius, Emerson suggests Chaplin's inherent talent:

Every master has found his materials collected, and his power lay in his sympathy with his people, and in his love of the materials he wrought in. What an economy of power! and what a compensation for the shortness of life! All is done to his hand. The world has brought him thus far on his way. The human race has gone out before him, sunk the hills, filled the hollows, and bridged the rivers. Men, nations, poets, artisans, women, all have worked for him, and he enters into their labours. . . . Great genial power, one would almost say, consists in not being original at all; in being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind.¹⁵

The Keystone formula was, essentially, to find an occasion to lead to a chase. It was the *movement*, and the speed of the movement, that mattered to Sennett. Chaplin changed the speed of the comic film; this change came from within Chaplin's sensibilities as a pantomime artist as well as his sympathy with the lower class. Chaplin separated the speed from the narrative; he centered his films around people, not around movement. In the course of his evolution as a director, Chaplin began to study faces and mannerisms with his camera, and the comedy often became graceful. As the character of the Tramp emerged and matured, especially in his feature films, Chaplin realized that comedy was tinged with pathos, and vice versa. He also recognized that beauty was the end of all human expression, and he found that beauty in details of ordinary life. In this, Chaplin invites Emerson's acknowledgment of human truth:

I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body; - - show me the ultimate reason of these matters; - - show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let

me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law; and the shop, the plow, and the leger, referred to the like cause by which light undulates and poets sing; - - and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber room, but has form and order; there is no trifle; there is no puzzle; but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench.¹⁶

Chaplin's comedy became the comedy of intimacy, with people and their desires; Chaplin created this intimacy with the camera, which found its depth in human fragility.

Once Chaplin, like Griffith, was offered a chance at directing, and once he got his taste for it, he could do nothing else. Linda Arvidson writes of Griffith's first experience at Biograph, "David Griffith had tasted blood - - cinema blood. And the call to stay . . . was the same sort of call that made those other pioneers trek across the plains with their prairie schooners in the days of forty-nine."¹⁷ The same was true of Chaplin, who immediately began to see ways the one reel

knockabout comedies in the Sennett style could be improved, to the chagrin of his boss. David Robinson writes that

Chaplin had made good use of his months at Keystone. In particular he had studied the work of the cutting room, and the jigsaw method of film construction that Sennett had inherited from Griffith. In addition, of course, he brought from Karno a highly developed skill in stagecraft. Already in his first film the *mise-en-scène* of each shot excels, or at least equals, the best work of the Keystone directors.¹⁸

During this period he discovered the tramp costume that would establish his comic figure.

Chaplin, standing around a set in street clothes while not working, was noticed by Sennett who told him, "We need some gags here Put on a comedy make-up. Anything will do." Chaplin recalls:

I had no idea what make-up to put on. . . . However, on the way to the wardrobe I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes, a cane and a derby hat. I wanted everything a contradiction: the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small and the shoes large. I was undecided whether to look old or young, but remembering Sennett had expected me to be a

much older man, I added a small moustache, which, I reasoned, would add age without hiding my expression.

I had no idea of the character. But the moment I was dressed, the clothes and the make-up made me feel the person he was. I began to know him, and by the time I walked onto the stage he was fully born. When I confronted Sennett I assumed the character and strutted about, swinging my cane and parading before him. Gags and comedy ideas went racing through my mind.

[Sennett] was a great audience and laughed genuinely at what he thought funny. He stood and giggled until his body began to shake. This encouraged me and I began to explain the character: "You know this fellow is many-sided, a tramp, a gentleman, a poet, a dreamer, a lonely fellow, always hopeful of romance and adventure. He would have you believe he is a scientist, a musician, a duke, a polo player. However, he is not above picking up cigarette butts or robbing a baby of its candy. And, of course, if the occasion warrants it, he will kick a lady in the rear - - but only in extreme anger!"¹⁹

Chaplin's description of the *characteristics* of the tramp are there, but the Tramp as a character, separate from Chaplin the director, would not fully emerge until Chaplin's years at First National. The costume changed very little in the twenty two years Chaplin wore it; and, as is evident, the Tramp did exhibit this behavior in Chaplin's films for Essanay and Mutual, though Chaplin did play other roles as well. But the Tramp as a fully registered personage, a character of immense plasticity, capable of pathos one moment and chaos the next, would not become evident for seven more years, and would mature during his feature films from 1925 - 1936.

After he fulfilled the terms of his Keystone Film Company at the end of 1914, Chaplin's status as the screen's premiere comic was assured. The popularity of his Keystone films, as (comparatively) primitive as they were, gave him greater bargaining power when his contract with Sennett had expired. He subsequently signed a much more lucrative contract with the Essanay Company, owned by George Spoor and G. M. "Bronco Billy" Anderson (the "A" in Essanay, Anderson had acted in Edwin Porter's 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery*). During his eighteen

month contract, Chaplin wrote and directed fifteen films for the company. Most significant is the fact that Chaplin would never again act in a film he did not write and direct.

Chaplin's Essanay period is principally marked by a slower pace and more elaborate development of character than the Keystone films. Chaplin reused bits (as well as some entire routines) from his Karno days, such as *A Night in the Show* (November 1915), a copy of Karno's *Mumming Birds*, with Chaplin re-enacting his role as the drunk to great effect. He also had found his leading actress for the next several years, the excellent Edna Purviance. The quality of Chaplin's comedic timing, his sense of pathos as a necessary element of effective comedy, the filmic techniques he learned from Sennett (who had, in turn, learned from Griffith), and his sense of editing and scene construction improved with each film he made; like Griffith, Chaplin (at least in the early years) did not work with a script, but shot scenes of comedic "business," and eventually assembled the final films through editing. He had not committed himself to a fixed method of filmmaking, though he was directing all of his films. He realized, though, "that each shot needed to be a stage for his own extended comedy routines. He declared this early that cutting was not an obligation but a convenience."²⁰

David Robinson notes that 1915 "had seen the great Chaplin explosion."²¹ Chaplin's brother Sydney came to America to handle Chaplin's business affairs, and it was only on his train trip from Los Angeles to New York that Chaplin became aware of his fame. At every stop along the route telegraph operators had sent word ahead of Chaplin's arrival; huge crowds greeted him at every station. Arriving in New York, he was advised to disembark at the 125th Street station rather than Grand Central because of the great congestion of people waiting for him there. This must have been a tremendous surprise for the music hall actor who was making \$60 per week

only two years earlier. His Essanay contract expired in May of 1916, and his success made him a valuable property. Sydney had arrived in time to negotiate the offers pouring in for Chaplin's services, and the amount of money offered seemed staggering. Eventually, Chaplin signed a new contract with the Mutual Film Corporation; he was guaranteed a salary of \$10,000 per week plus a \$150,000 signing bonus. Mutual's press agent, Terry Ramsaye, noted that "next to the war in Europe Chaplin is the most expensive item in contemporaneous history. Every hour that goes by brings Chaplin \$77.55 and if he should need a nickel for a carfare it only takes him two seconds to earn it."²² At the time, "no person in the world other than a king or an emperor - - unless perhaps Charlie Schwab of the US Steel Corporation - - had ever received even half that salary."²³

Chaplin's twelve films for Mutual demonstrate his maturing as an artist and as a director. The range of styles for the Mutuals went from Keystone-styled (albeit more stylized) knockabout (*The Floorwalker*, *The Rink*) to technical virtuosity (*The Pawnshop*), exquisite choreography (*The Rink*, *The Cure*, *One A.M.*) to more complex narrative form and social awareness (*The Immigrant*). Though Chaplin had no formal education, he was drawn to literature and philosophy. Stan Laurel, a fellow Karno player, reported in 1911 that "he read books incessantly. He carried his violin wherever he could. Had the strings reversed so he could play left-handed, and he would practice for hours."²⁴ At this same time, another Karno actor recalled that after performing,

he lapses into a reserved state of mind during which he either sits quite still and thinks - - thinks - - thinks, or delves into the pages of the heaviest kind of literature he can find - - philosophy preferred. It is said of him that, when in a small town where he could not secure a book to his liking, he purchased a Latin grammar and satisfied his peculiar mood for a time by devouring the dry contents as though it was a modern novel.²⁵

Chaplin's increased sophistication as an artist allowed him to become more adventurous. His fourth film for Mutual, *One A.M.*, is a one-man show (except for a brief bit with Chester Conklin as a taxi driver). Chaplin's character arrives home, quite drunk, and finds his house has, in a fashion, turned against him. The film is an amazing performance of a man wrestling with ordinary furniture - - rugs, a lazy Susan table, staircases, a wildly swinging pendulum clock, and undoubtedly the most vile Murphy bed in cinema. Chaplin carries the entire two reel film by the force of his sheer dexterity. However, Chaplin's comedic style had gained more subtlety by this time. As James Agee writes of Chaplin's solo turn in *One A.M.*:

Chaplin got his laughs less from the gags, or from milking them in any ordinary sense, than through his genius for what may be called *inflection* - - the perfect, changeful shading of his physical and emotional attitudes toward the gag. Funny as his bout with the Murphy bed is, the glances of awe, expostulation and helpless, almost whimpering desire for vengeance which he darts at this infernal machine are even better.²⁶

As *the* physical comic of the day, the emotional affections of *One A.M.* proved that Chaplin was without peer.

The Floorwalker, Chaplin's first Mutual, was again a virtuoso physical performance, a film that caused Terry Ramsaye to comment, "Chaplin films are not made. They occur." Ramsaye added:

Mr Chaplin did not care a whoop about the floorwalker person as a type - - what he sought were the wonderful possibilities of the escalator as a vehicle upon which to have a lot of most amusing troubles. *The Floorwalker* was built was built about the escalator not the floorwalker.

The history of *The Floorwalker* is in a diagnostic sense typical of the building of a Chaplin comedy. Every one of them is built *around* something.²⁷

To be sure, *The Floorwalker* is more Keystone than the rest of the Mutuals. Certainly Chaplin's comedies usually centered around contrary objects - - as demonstrated by *One A.M.* - - and all

contained objects seemingly intent on barring Chaplin's progress. But the Mutuals, as a group, tend to center around relationships. Chaplin's attempts to win the girl of the film was no doubt by this time a standard theme (and most often an excuse for the Keystone chase), but as *The Pawnshop*, *Behind the Screen*, *The Rink*, *Easy Street*, *The Immigrant*, and *The Adventurer* all demonstrate, the complications surrounding the inevitable girl at the center of the film (usually Edna Purviance) have become more complex, and Chaplin's methods consequently become more daring and more clever. At least in part this is due to the simple fact that Chaplin is making longer films - - there are no one reel films here - - but also to his increasing acumen as a constructor of storylines adequate to bring out pathos and sentiment. Chaplin told an interviewer in 1917,

I have also been longing to make a serio-comedy, the action of which is set in the Parisian *Quartier Latin*.

This theme offers unbounded scope for the sentimental touch which somehow always creeps into my stories. But the trouble is so to prevent that touch from smothering the comedy end. There's so much pathos back of the lives of all true bohemians that it is hard to lose sight of it even for a moment and the real spirit of that community is far too human and deeply respected by the world at large for me to even think of burlesquing it.²⁸

David Robinson notes that *The Immigrant* clearly started out to be this film. Released in June 1917, *The Immigrant* is the most fully developed Chaplin film to date, in terms of story and narrative style. The film falls neatly into two acts: the sequences aboard the immigrant ship, and the sequences in America, as the immigrants, the Tramp and his girl (Edna Purviance) try to get along, penniless, in the new world. On board ship, Chaplin's physical comedy is evident, as he survives a rough ocean, a violently rocking ship and a terribly tossed mess hall. As well, he manages to meet a Edna and her mother, whose money has been stolen. The Tramp then wins the

money back in a card game. The dualistic nature of the Tramp is demonstrated by his determination to catch the crooks and retrieve the money, but he is able to do so because he can cheat them at cards. The Tramp has a morality that places him outside the law, but one which he manages to utilize toward altruistic (and romantic) ends. The shipboard sequence of the film is this most overt demonstration of this nature of the Tramp.

The film also carries perhaps the first overtly political statement in a Chaplin film. As the ship sails into New York, the title reads, "The arrival in the land of liberty"; followed by a wide shot of the immigrants' hopeful faces, reverse shot of the Statue of Liberty as it passes by the ship (we see it pass through the frame, as from the immigrants' POV); brief reverse shot of the immigrants (same as before); brief shot of the Statue, moving out of the frame; and a following medium long shot of the immigrants being manhandled, roped, numbered, and herded like cattle. From this sequence, the film passes directly into Act Two, which finds the Tramp broke and hungry. Many of Chaplin's sight gags fall under Noël Carroll's category of "the object analog," whereby "one object is equated with another. One object, that is, can be seen under two aspects: one literal and one metaphorical."²⁹ Carroll's example is from *The Pawnshop*, when the Tramp drops his cane into the tuba as though it were an umbrella stand, and places his hat inside a birdcage as though it were a hatbox. However, to take Carroll a step further, this scene represents a visual analog. The Statue of Liberty is seen under two aspects: literal (a landmark, as seen by the audience - - I am assuming an American audience) and metaphorical (a symbol of freedom and promise, as seen by the immigrants). Once the Statue moves out of the frame, and thus out of the immigrants' sight, the freedom they imagined is contrasted with their treatment as animals. The following shot of the penniless and starving Tramp confirms this: the promise has somehow failed, and instead of

the sight gag to which this is related, the humor is metamorphosed into despair. Thus, the film takes on a depth of social and political commentary, and a complexity of narrative imagery, that had not to this point been utilized by Chaplin. *The Immigrant* does resolve happily, as the Tramp meets Edna again in a restaurant and, after much confusion about payment for their beans and coffee meal, Edna is noticed by an artist who wants to paint her portrait, and advances the couple enough money to marry. Without this resolution, the film, for all its gags (and there are plenty) might qualify as a tragedy; Chaplin had not walked the line so closely before. A brief scene in the restaurant demonstrates how Chaplin manages to keep a balance between comedy and sentimentality. When the Tramp sees Edna in the restaurant, he can tell by the black lace on her handkerchief that her mother has died. As he stares into her eyes, full of sympathy, he manages to drop his beans into his coffee cup. Here, though, the comedy underscores the poignancy of the scene; clearly, the Tramp wishes to provide for Edna, while he cannot even provide for himself.

The Immigrant is a significant film in another respect. Henry Bergman, who had been playing the “heavy” in the film, lacked the sufficient threatening force to make the comedy in the restaurant effective. After a week’s shooting, he recast Eric Campbell, his greatest “heavy,” in the role. For a director to simply scrap a week’s worth of footage was unheard of. New Mutual publicity director Carlyle Robinson noted that Chaplin shot 40,000 feet of film for *The Immigrant*; the finished film measured 1800 feet.³⁰ Chaplin had the artistic and financial freedom to satisfy his own intuitive impulses, a condition well deserved and well utilized; Chaplin’s films would continue to get stronger, more daring, and more complex.

The Immigrant and *Easy Street* are the best of the Mutual films. While *Easy Street* does not provide overt political critique, traces of Chaplin’s social awareness are evident; in this sense,

Easy Street would foreshadow elements of *The Kid*, *City Lights*, and *Modern Times*. *Easy Street* combines an amalgam of Chaplin motifs and echoes his past in several ways. The opening church scene, during which Chaplin is transformed, shows Chaplin holding a hymnal sideways and upside down as he follows the song, indicating that he cannot read (a similar scene in the restaurant occurs in *The Immigrant*). David Robinson suggests that the slums of *Easy Street*, where Charlie has taken a job as a policeman, must have seemed a reminiscence of the Kennington Road area he knew as a child: "The setting has the unmistakable look of South London. Even today, Methley Street, where Hannah Chaplin and her younger son lodged, between Hayward's pickle factory and the slaughterhouse, presents the same arrested vista, the cross-bar of the 'T' leading to the grimmer mysteries on either side."³¹ The scenes of policeman being pummeled by the roughs on the street, and the manner in which they are led in and out of the station, recalls Mack Sennett's *Keystone Kops*.

The poverty of *Easy Street* residents is striking, as are the disturbing scenes of domestic violence and drug abuse. While Chaplin, as an unlikely policeman (indeed, the first citizen to see him in uniform outside the station laughs at him and receives a truncheon to the head), requires a violent environment in which to work to maximize his comic effect, here it is not Chaplin's condition that evokes our sympathy. Rather, it is the condition of the woman of the street, fainting from hunger; the couple with children too numerous to count, obviously underfed; the wife of Eric Campbell, beaten nearly senseless. These symbols of poverty and despair gain their power from Chaplin's selection of them. Of this power of the symbol Emerson writes:

This power is in the image because this power is in Nature. It so affects, because it so is. All that is wondrous in Swedenborg is not his invention, but his extraordinary perception; - that he was necessitated so to see. The world realized the mind. Better than images is

seen through them. The selection of the image is no more arbitrary than the power and significance of the image. The selection must follow fate. Poetry, if perfected, is the only verity; is the speech of man after the real, and not after the apparent.³²

Thus, Chaplin's cinema expresses a moral imperative. Chaplin manages to cleverly dispatch Campbell (twice), helps mission worker Edna Purviance feed the mass of children, and allows the hungry woman to keep the ham he has seen her steal (while he proceeds to steal even more food for her himself). Here, as elsewhere, Chaplin's character acts outside of the law to provide morally correct ends to the needs of the people. This is almost a constant in Chaplin films in which Chaplin is opposing the law, but the case of *Easy Street* is different in that Chaplin is a policeman himself. Perhaps the familiarity of the environment and circumstances affected Chaplin personally. Just before the film's release, Chaplin published his own commentary regarding its treatment of authority:

If there is one human type more than any other that the whole wide world has it in for, it is the policeman type. Of course the policeman isn't really to blame for the public prejudice against his uniform - - it's just natural human revulsion against any sort of authority - - but just the same everybody loves to see the 'copper' get it where the chicken got the axe.³³

Interestingly Chaplin talks here of types, making a distinction between the "policeman type" and the man who wears the uniform. In this sense, Chaplin's statement seems almost a disclaimer.

Technically, *Easy Street* is a masterpiece of *mise-en-scène*, pacing, and choreography. While one characteristic of the Mutual films is their more leisurely pacing, as demonstrated by *The Count*, *The Pawnshop*, *Behind the Screen*, *The Cure*, and *The Immigrant*, *Easy Street* flies along at breakneck pace once the film moves out of the church, and it never lets up. Chaplin keeps masses of people moving continually on the street, either from foreground to rear, or from left to right. The more obvious mob of roughs in the middle of the street, beating the policemen, is

echoed by the less obvious mob of the sidewalks and apartment windows. For the most part, the action on the street is shot from the end of the 'T', looking toward the cross street, with the movement strikingly symmetrical.

The set, with its narrow doorways, hallways, and windows, certainly necessitated precise choreography to have so many people moving through the openings, seemingly in one great herd. Chaplin manages to stay a step ahead of the pursuing mob; for every dead end there is an escape, making the buildings of the set seem like a giant maze, with the people as rats. And there is no escaping the maze; every escape leads to another end, even to the cellar where perhaps the most frighteningly realistic Chaplin villain lurks: the heroin addict. Naturally, Edna winds up trapped here, as does Chaplin; and, in anticipation of *Modern Times*, Chaplin accidentally becomes injected and in his drugged state finds the strength and courage to dispose of the addict and save them both. Since there is no escape from the maze-like confines of the street, the only solution is redemption. At the end of the film, the street is orderly, the "New Mission" significantly occupies the property at the head of the cross, and the scene is one of such placidity that it almost serves to remind one of Griffith's majestic redemptive endings; indeed, Robinson refers to the story as "a comic parody of Victorian 'reformation' melodramas."³⁴ Perhaps it is significant that *Easy Street* was released in 1917, only one year after *Intolerance* and two years after *The Birth of a Nation*.

Lewis Jacobs writes that "this unique actor, director, and producer has added little to movie technique or movie form. He has not been a technician but a pantomimist, a commentator, a satirist, a social critic. His artistic problems have not been cinematic; they have been personal, always being solved by feeling."³⁵ The latter part of this statement is not in dispute, but Jacobs does not take into account the immediate effect Chaplin had at the beginning of his career. True,

Sennett did not use him in any capacity for a month. But once he began to take over his own projects, Chaplin did indeed contribute to cinema form, at least as it was practiced at Keystone.

The changes Chaplin made would remain with him, and he would build on them in the future.

Robinson describes the nature of Chaplin's earliest innovations:

The traditional historical view of Chaplin's innovations at Keystone is that, despite the doubt and resistance of Sennett and the Keystone comedians, he succeeded in slowing down the helter-skelter pace, and introduced new subtlety to the gag comedy. This is true so far as it goes, but the difference lay deeper. Keystone comedy was created from without; anecdote and situations were *explained* in pantomime and gesture. Chaplin's comedy was created from within. What the audience saw in him was the expression of thoughts and feelings, and the comedy lay in relationship of those thoughts and feelings to the things that happened around him. The crucial point of Chaplin's comedy was not the comic occurrence itself, but Charlie's relationship and attitude to it.³⁶

This point should be considered more closely. Chaplin's "comedy from within" changed audience reaction to the comedy film, from observation to association. Rather than creating a spectacle to laugh *at* (though there was indeed plenty of this as well), Chaplin created a character to identify *with*. As Walter Kerr describes it:

He is elbowing his way into immortality, both as a 'character' in the film and as a professional comedian to be remembered. And he is doing it by calling attention to the camera as camera.

He would do this throughout his career, using the instrument as a means of establishing a direct and openly acknowledged relationship between himself and his audience. In fact he is . . . establishing himself as one among the audience, one among those who are astonished by this new mechanical marvel, one among those who would like to be photographed by it, and - - he would make the most of the implication later - - one among those who are inevitably chased away. He looked through at the camera and went through it, joining the rest of us. The seeds of his subsequent hold upon the public, the mysterious and almost inexplicable bond between the performer and everyman, were there. Interestingly, they were put there by pointing a finger at the actuality of what was happening, at the fact that some men were taking a picture of something real.³⁷

Chaplin used the camera to create an intimacy between himself and his audience; he addressed not humans, but the human condition. He found in minor details the grace of experience - - Edna's black-lined handkerchief, the expression of her eyes (as Easy Street reformer or propmaster's assistant), the compassion of her sheriff of Devil's Gulch. Emerson describes this condition of seeing:

Poetry begins, or all becomes poetry, when we look from the centre outward, and are using all as if the mind made it. That only can we see which we are, and which we make. The weaver sees gingham; the broker sees the stock-list; the politician, the ward and county votes; the poet sees the horizon, and the shores of matter lying on the sky, the interaction of the elements, - - the large effect of laws which correspond to the inward laws which he knows, and so are but a kind of extension of himself.³⁸

This condition of "looking from the centre outward" exactly expresses the nature of Chaplin's cinema.

While Griffith's contemporaneous films, most notably *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* were of an epic scale, Chaplin's films were intimate and much more personal. Walter Kerr writes, "An epic wants an event of great scale and significance, one rooted in a historical moment, a moment so representative that it takes on mythological status. And it wants a hero at its center who certainly need not be perfect but whose high aspirations are matched by his capabilities."³⁹

The hero at the center of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* was none other than Griffith himself. Of the comparative place of comedy, Kerr writes, "A comedian's qualities are not at all what an epic wants [c]omedy's business had always been to reduce pretension, to mock deep seriousness, to ask what could be so lofty about a man whose shirttail was hanging out."⁴⁰

Chaplin had abandoned the Griffith-like editing he learned from Sennett, who employed the technique of parallel editing to heighten the pace of chase scenes, a staple of the Keystone films.

Once he began developing the Tramp character in 1913, Chaplin began to embody the Tramp as a multifaceted figure rather than as a type. Though the Tramp remained nameless, the character was no mere allegorical figure, but a character of increasing complexity. Chaplin had the gift of evoking tremendous sympathy from his audience through identification rather than spectacle. Griffith's films, by comparison, established the cinema as the canvas for a national literature. From the turn of the century until Chaplin's success, comedy had been the poor cousin of cinema, in large part because of Griffith's great aesthetic achievements. Chaplin, however, reduced the scale of the spectacle from epic poem to lyrical ballad. In a February, 1915 interview, in which Griffith was asked, "Why call [your film] *The Birth of a Nation*?" he replied, "Because it is. . . . The Civil War was fought fifty years ago. But the real nation has only existed for the last fifteen or twenty years, for there can exist no union without sympathy and oneness of sentiment."⁴¹ *The Birth of a Nation* has the feel of a nation-making epic. *Intolerance*, too, is painted with such large and allegorical strokes that it assumes the position of an American moral imperative. The two films taken together combine to form an American mythos, so heavily weighted that later American cinema naturally gravitated to its influence and drew from its technique. Chaplin provides the counterpart to the national epic: the personal tale told with great detail, the comedy of pathos. If Griffith is our Homer, then Chaplin is our Shakespeare.

Notes

1. David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life & Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 45. Robinson's biography, originally published in 1985, remains the standard for Chaplin's life and work. Robinson, in a sense, continues the work of Theodore Huff, the first to compile a complete record of Chaplin's films in 1944. As well, he corrects some errors perpetuated in Denis Gifford's otherwise notable 1974 biography *Chaplin*. Joyce Milton's 1996 biography *Tramp: The Life of Charlie Chaplin* is neither as concise nor informative as Robinson's work, and at times seems to take an attitude of moral indignity regarding its subject.
2. Ibid., 31.
3. Ibid., 18.
4. Ibid., 72.
5. Ibid., 71.
6. Ibid., 72.
7. James Agee, *Agee on Film, Volume One* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969), 4.
8. Robinson, 107.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 108.
11. Ibid., 111.
12. Agee, 6.
13. François Truffaut, "Charlie Chaplin Was a Man Just Like Any Other Man," in André Bazin, *Essays on Chaplin*. Ed. and Trans. Jean Bodon (New Haven, CT: University of New Haven Press, 1985), 94.
14. Robinson, 121-22.
15. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Shakespeare, or the Poet," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume IV: Representative Men: Seven Lectures*. Ed. Douglas Emory Wilson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 110.
16. Emerson, *The American Scholar*, in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 67-68.

17. Linda Arvidson (Mrs. D. W. Griffith), *When the Movies Were Young* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1925), 45.
18. Robinson, 123.
19. Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 144.
20. Robinson, 127.
21. Ibid., 148.
22. Ibid., 157.
23. Ibid., 160.
24. Ibid., 93.
25. Ibid.
26. Agee, 9.
27. Robinson, 169.
28. Ibid., 195.
29. Noël Carroll, "Notes on the Sight Gag," in *Comedy / Cinema / Theory*. Ed. Andrew S. Horton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 36.
30. Robinson, 197-201.
31. Ibid., 191.
32. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition volume VIII: Letters and Social Aims*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (New York: AMS Press, 1904), 20.
33. Robinson, 192.
34. Ibid., 191.
35. Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1967), 226.
36. Robinson, 113.
37. Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 22.

38. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 41.

39. Kerr, 246.

40. Ibid.

41. D. W. Griffith, excerpted from "D. W. Griffith, Producer of the World's Biggest Picture: Interview with D. W. Griffith," *New York American*, City Life and Dramatic section page 9, February 28, 1915. In *Focus on D. W. Griffith*. Ed. Harry M. Geduld (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), 28.

Chapter 10

The Kid, The Gold Rush, City Lights: Apotheosis

Chaplin's Tramp character began to take on more of a distinct personality with the more fully developed stories and moral dilemmas of *Easy Street* and *The Immigrant*. These films bring the Tramp, as an individual, into the world of moral responsibility by presenting choices he must make in light of a moral imperative that had rarely been present in Chaplin's Tramp comedies before. As noted, in both films the Tramp subverts the established social order to preserve the moral integrity he feels to be necessary for the inherent dignity of those who share his condition on the underside of society. Three films - - *The Kid* (1921), *The Gold Rush* (1925), and *City Lights* (1931) - - demonstrate the transformation of the Tramp into a living, evolving symbol whose actions transcend filmic context as well as filmic time.

In the feature films Chaplin made for United Artists, the Tramp seems to have emerged on the screen from the detritus of a recognizable, realistic culture. He never seems to be projected into his opening situation (how did this man get to be a tramp? never seems the correct question to ask), but simply is there. It is as though the Tramp walks onto a film already in progress, makes his mark on it, and at the end ambles off down the road, alone, iris out. Walter Kerr writes,

the tramp is a philosophical, not a social, statement. And it was a conclusion to which Chaplin came, not a choice he imposed from the outset. The tramp is the residue of all the bricklayers and householders and *bon vivants* and women and fiddlers and floorwalkers and drunks and ministers Chaplin had played so well, too well. The tramp was all that was left. Sometimes the dark pain filling Chaplin's eyes is in excess of the situation at hand. It comes from the hopeless limitation of having no limitations.¹

The Tramp represents, in a sense, Emerson's expression in "The Over-Soul," "Man is a stream whose source is hidden."² Likewise, James Agee makes this observation:

Of all comedians he worked most deeply and most shrewdly within a realization of what a human being is, and is up against. The Tramp is as centrally representative of humanity, as many-sided and as mysterious, as Hamlet, and it seems unlikely that any dancer or actor can ever have excelled him in eloquence, variety or poignancy of motion.³

Emerson, at the beginning of his essay “History” reasserts a condition of unity of all human minds:

There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. He that is once admitted to the right of reason is made a freeman of the whole estate. What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at times has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind, is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent.⁴

Emerson’s statement of access to the “universal mind” is conditional; man must be “admitted to the right of reason” for the chance to roam the “whole estate.” Chaplin’s Tramp is such a man, and his admission to this “universal mind” is the Tramp’s engagement of the moral universe, which in *The Kid* he must engage on a different, and far more significant, level. In past incarnations, the Tramp could defy the law to rescue a widow’s stolen money in *The Pilgrim*, or cheat at cards to (again) rescue stolen money in *The Immigrant*, or risk his life to maintain order on *Easy Street*. But in *The Kid*, the Tramp is not motivated by his own needs, or the possibility of Edna’s love. Now he is responsible for a human life, for raising an abandoned child, and the Tramp of this film is more serious; he realizes the stakes are considerably higher, and his motivation is moral responsibility, for more than his own well-being is at stake. This moral determination in the Tramp takes on characteristics of what Emerson termed “the moral sentiment,” qualities Emerson declared inherent in Christ. In Emersonian terms this is the nature of Christ and the action of the poet: “He [Jesus Christ] saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there.”⁵

Spirituality, in a non-orthodox sense, is not lost in Chaplin's direction of *The Kid*. The spiritual element of *The Kid* defines the complexities of the matured, multifaceted character of the Tramp, and again recalls Emerson: "The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus; in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire."⁶ The spark of divinity that Chaplin nurtures in the Tramp does not come from any orthodox American religious tradition; it has its most direct relation to Emerson. This idea is perhaps further suggested by a dinner conversation Chaplin recalled between himself and Rachmaninoff:

It seems that each time art is discussed I have a different explanation of it. Why not? That evening I said that art was an additional emotion applied to skillful technique. Someone brought the topic around to religion and I confessed I was not a believer. Rachmaninoff quickly interposed: "But how can you have art without religion?"

I was stumped for a moment. "I don't think we are talking about the same thing," I said. "My concept of religion is a belief in a dogma - - and art is a feeling more than a belief."

"So is religion," he answered. After that I shut up.⁷

Nevertheless, the compassion of Christ - - as well as his suffering - - are evident in images in *The Kid*.

The film opens with the title, "A picture with a smile - and perhaps a tear," indicating that the film will not be a typical Chaplin comic turn, built around gags or props. While Chaplin had been preparing the film he was warned by writer and friend Gouverneur Morris that mixing slapstick and sentiment would not work because one element of the story would fail. Chaplin's reply was:

I said that the transition from slapstick to sentiment was a matter of feeling and discretion in arranging sequences. I argued that the form happened after one had created it, that if the

artist thought of a world and sincerely believed in it, no matter what the admixture was it would be convincing. Of course, I had no grounds for this theory other than intuition.⁸

It is exactly Chaplin's intuition that makes the film a success. Chaplin filmed *The Kid* in continuity, which may have added to its organicism. The story grows out of circumstance: the Tramp finds the Kid; the Tramp loses the Kid to city officials; the Tramp rescues the Kid; the Tramp loses the Kid to the police (he is betrayed by a flophouse attendant); the Tramp, in a dream sequence, finds the Kid; the Kid loses the Tramp in the dream; the Tramp and the Kid are reunited, along with Edna, at the end of the film. The business in between this pattern of loss and recovery is motivated by the necessity of the situation and the environment. In Emersonian terms the story is a moral poem in which the fact finds its own form.

After the opening title, Chaplin shows us an establishing shot of a charity hospital, cuts to a medium shot of the gates and some approaching, shadowy figures, and offers another title: "The woman - whose sin was motherhood." Edna Purviance, baby in arms, is ushered out of the hospital, with the gates defiantly locked behind her. As she walks slowly away the contempt of the charity workers is obvious; Chaplin makes this evident by keeping the camera on the two workers and their expressions, while allowing Edna to slowly exit the frame. There is a cut to a long shot of the hospital, with Edna walking toward the camera; she stops and arbitrarily, it seems, picks a direction to go. Indeed, she is outcast, and it is here that Chaplin adds the first of a number of astonishing shots in the film: Edna walks out of the frame at right, and as she passes, the image of Christ, struggling up the hill bearing his cross, is superimposed on the image, until the hospital fades from view, and quickly following the image of Christ fades to black. The irony of Christ imposed over the "Charity" hospital is obvious, and this is the first time in the film that

Chaplin associates Edna and the baby with the nativity. This association is further cemented by a sequence which appeared in the original release, but was cut from the film in all its re-released forms because of Chaplin's fear of over-sentimentalizing the image. It is a loss to the film's prologue, because the sequence is strikingly poignant. In the original film, after the Christ image, Chaplin cuts to Edna walking along a sidewalk, coming upon a church where a wedding has just taken place. As the bride and groom leave, Edna stands to one side, framed by a stained glass window. In an extraordinary composition, Edna's head is surrounded by a large circle in the glass, giving her a halo and completing the image of Madonna and child. The image is startling in its resemblance of renaissance Madonna portraits, adding to the timelessness of the parable we are being shown.

In the re-released version, after the screen fades to black, it opens again with a centered iris onto a park and a walking lane, where Edna takes a seat on a bench. The title simply reads, "Alone." The frame irises out on Edna's tortured face. Another sequence was cut, appearing in the original release just before the church scene, showing Edna's encounter with the baby's father, an artist. As the film is shown now, this sequence is gone, and Edna's love interest is identified in a separate sequence. Chaplin identifies the character with a title, interestingly not as the father, but as "The Man." He is identified with Edna by the photograph of her on his mantle. As the man is negotiating with a customer over one of his paintings, he carelessly knocks Edna's photo into the fireplace and, realizing his mistake, simply watches it burn. Another cut sequence had Edna, now a famous opera star, meet by chance encounter her former lover. As they stand on a balcony together, a title (without identifying the speaker) reads, "Regrets." Chaplin, in the reissue, cuts the Kid's biological father out of the film; he is identified as "The Man," and the leap

of imagination (albeit not a very large one) is left to the audience. But the changes in the film do emphasize, as a result, the questionable paternity of the Kid. Later, when a doctor is called in to see to the sick Kid, he asks the Tramp if he is the father of the child. The Tramp's hesitant response is, "Well - - practically."

The film runs for nearly four and a half minutes before we see its first gag. Edna has abandoned the child in a limousine,⁹ which is promptly stolen. There has been no hint of comedy so far - - in fact, after the crooks find the baby in the car, one of them wants to shoot it - - but instead they leave it in an alley, presumably to die. Chaplin then cuts to Edna, again on the path, walking aimlessly, away from the camera. However, the shot is echoed by the next shot, in which we see the appearance of the Tramp, out for his "morning promenade." He strolls along in true Tramp fashion, trying to maintain dignity in spite of his disarrangement. He carefully searches his coat for his cigarette case, which is an old sardine tin. He opens it to select the most choice of a number of discarded butts inside, removing his fingerless gloves to do so. It is in this slum back alley that the Tramp will find the child. Though this seems an odd bit of comedy - - a child has been abandoned by its mother, left to die in the garbage, and the most disarrayed figure will be the one to discover it, we know the Tramp to be a creation of Chaplin's imagination, and we know Chaplin, and so we are willing to go along. Walter Kerr makes the point that, in fact, Chaplin has found the means to pull off this odd combination:

The comedian has hit upon a trick - - it is more than a trick, it is a philosophical premise for dimensional comedy - - of permitting us to see and to feel what is realistically distressing about life through the magnifying glass, and *only* through the magnifying glass, of humor. The two are not to be alternated, not even closely alternated. And seriousness is not to have priority. That belongs to comedy if it is going to *be* comedy. Chaplin has at last created a landscape with figures. The two are one, though the elements are different. The

landscape is serious. The figures are comic. Our attention is on the figures; we will sense the landscape soon enough.¹⁰

I might add to Kerr's observation that our attention is on the figures as comic only when the Tramp enters the scene. Before this, Edna, the condescending charity workers, the callous lover, the crooks, have been anything but comic. For the first four minutes, we might be watching a Griffith one-reeler from ten years earlier.

After the Tramp has taken the child in, he must make adjustments to the dingy, tiny attic in which he lives. David Robinson has noted that this attic seems remarkably like the one in which Chaplin himself grew up, at 3 Pownall Terrace, Kennington. Robinson further states that the attic "might be an illustration to *Oliver Twist*, with its sloping ceiling under the eaves, its peeling walls, bare boards, maimed furniture and a door giving onto a precipice of stairs."¹¹ Chaplin finds usage in things as they are necessary to *him*, and not to the world; in Emersonian terms he is bending the universe to his will. Walter Kerr writes that a quality of his screen personality is his "adjusting the rest of the universe to his merely reflexive needs."¹² Likewise, François Truffaut, in *The Films of My Life*, quotes André Bazin:

It seems that objects accept Charlie's help only when they are outside the meaning society has assigned to them. The most beautiful example of such a displacement is the famous dance of the loaves of bread in which the objects' complicity explodes into a free choreography.¹³

Bazin refers, of course, to the 'Oceana Roll' sequence from *The Gold Rush*, but the point is well taken that the Tramp lives in a world of his imagination's creation, and in which objects find a variety of uses. Chaplin, depressed by a young critic's opinion that *City Lights* was too sentimental and did not approximate realism, said "I could have told him that so-called realism is

often artificial, phony, prosaic and dull; and that it is not reality that matters in a film but what the imagination can make of it.”¹⁴ Emerson had made this very claim eighty five years earlier.

As Kerr pointed out, the landscape is real, the characters comic; however, the characters obey the story, not the possibilities for a gag, and convey real emotion when necessary. Many critics have praised, for good reason, Jackie Coogan’s remarkable performance as the Kid. As Robinson points out, Jackie’s talent was mimicry, and indeed there is much pure Chaplin to be seen in his character. However, in the scene in which the Kid is being taken away by county welfare workers, and the Tramp is being restrained, the pain on the Tramp’s face is nothing we have seen before; it is as though the character becomes transparent and we see into the core of his being. Likewise, the Kid, in the back of the truck, is more than mimicking the Tramp’s pain; his crying is a child’s crying, and is just as sincere. In this scene, at one point the Kid rolls his eyes to heaven, as if to ask for intervention, a recurring motif in this film. We first see it from Edna, after she abandons the child in the car. The Tramp does it a number of times throughout the film. It is a subtle gesture, a far cry from the exaggeration of Keystone-style gesturing, and almost imperceptible, but it is there, in seriousness. I can recall no other Chaplin film in which this is repeated, or in which a prayer is invoked for a purpose other than a gag. This simple inflection underlies the deep seriousness of the film; this is the landscape Kerr warned us about.

The dream sequence in the film is one of Chaplin’s most extraordinary. After the Tramp has been searching the city all night looking for the Kid, he comes home at dawn and falls asleep on the stoop of his building. His dream begins with the introduction of the courtyard of the slum area in which he lives, clean and covered in flowers. All the characters of the slums appear - - even the bully and the cop - - as angels, and as they wake the Tramp, he finds the Kid as an angel

as well. The Kid takes the Tramp to get his own wings, and the two begin to fly around. However, the devil sneaks past the guardian of the gates to this paradise (who is the flophouse manager, who earlier had turned the Kid over to the police, causing the Tramp's night-long search), and sin is introduced in the form of a flirtatious angel and her jealous boyfriend. The dream becomes a kind of Blake vision, in which the Tramp must escape the jealous boyfriend; there is much fighting, and in his attempt to fly away, is shot dead by the cop. The Tramp's dead body, still an angel, is limp on the stoop, the Kid crying over it. One gets the feeling, from this scene alone, that *The Kid* is a Chaplin comedy in the same sense that Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is an innocent "boy's book."

As the Tramp is shaken by the Kid in the dream, he awakens to find himself shaken by the cop in the waking world, who leads him to a waiting car. The Tramp is taken to a mansion; he could not be more out of his element. Edna appears at the door, the famous and wealthy opera singer, and she has the Kid, her rediscovered son, who is joyously reunited with the Tramp. The three disappear into the house, and the film ends. Just as the Tramp strolled into an existing scene, he strolls out of another one, behind a private door, and we will never know what transpires. The reuniting of the Tramp, the Kid, and Edna is enough to close the film in its symbolic sense.

Chaplin met bravely the criticism that the film was overly sentimental, which he had been nervous about all along. When he composed a new score and re-cut the film for reissue in the 1970s, he cut previously mentioned scenes to curb the (perceived) sentimentality of the film. The fact that the film is not strictly 'real' in the sense that it does display an element of fancy (and it is a comedy, after all) is a point of minor concern in the world Chaplin has created. Also, the significance of *The Kid* to his career is obvious in the complexity of every film that followed it.

Chaplin's Tramp is, with this film, an evolving symbol, both inside and transcending his world at the same time. And, ultimately, the moral reassertion of a symbolic order is, as in *The Kid*, enough to close the film. In his essay "Poetry and Imagination," Emerson writes:

A happy symbol is a sort of evidence that your thought is just. I had rather have a good symbol of my thought, or a good analogy, than the suffrage of Kant or Plato. If you agree with me, or if Locke or Montesquieu agree, I may yet be wrong; but if the elm-tree thinks the same thing, if running water, if burning coal, if crystals, if alkalies, in their several fashions say what I say, it must be true. Thus a good symbol is the best argument, and is a missionary to persuade thousands. . . . There is no more welcome gift to men than a new symbol.¹⁵

Emerson's latent mysticism, of which Bliss Perry accused him, is evident here; but there is a hint of the mystic in Chaplin as well, and on occasion he could be just as expansive about it. At a small dinner party just after the release of *The Kid*, Chaplin suddenly became outspoken:

There is nothing so beautiful that it will make people forget their eggs and bacon for breakfast - - as for admiration of the world - - it's not worth anything - - there is in the end but oneself to please: - - you make something because it means something to you. You work - - because you have a superabundance of vital energy. You find that not only can you make children but you can express yourself in other ways. In the end it is you - - all you - - your work, your thought, your conception of the beautiful, yours the happiness, yours the satisfaction. Be brave enough to face the veil and lift it, and see and know the void it hides, and stand before that void and know that within yourself is your world.¹⁶

This is, and has been, Emerson's clarion call for the moral good of man since 1836.

Chaplin's next film, his first for the United Artists company he had formed with Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and D. W. Griffith in 1919, would be his first feature-length film. Chaplin had finally fulfilled his disharmonious contract with First National, and now he had unlimited time and resources at his new production facility. Given his obsession with perfection, this new freedom allowed Chaplin to pour his energies into the new film without reserve. The story idea came to him when he saw a photograph of hundreds of prospectors making their way

through the Chilkoot Pass during the Klondike gold rush. He was also inspired by the Donner party story, as the cannibal scenes in the first ‘cabin sequence’ of *The Gold Rush* will attest. Chaplin once stated that “When I realize how distorted even recent events have become, history as such only arouses my skepticism - - whereas a poetic interpretation achieves a general effect of the period. After all, there are more valid facts and details in works of art than there are in history books.”¹⁷ Likewise, in *Nature*, Emerson quotes Plato as writing that “poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history”¹⁸; and, in “Poetry and Imagination,” Emerson writes “poetry is the only verity, - - the expression of a sound mind after the ideal, and not after the apparent.”¹⁹

Chaplin is interested, now more than ever since his European tour after the war exposed him to extremes of suffering which affected him deeply, in the human condition and in human relations, dominant themes in *The Gold Rush*. *The Gold Rush* took 170 days (non-consecutive) to shoot. Chaplin exposed 231,505 feet of film in the process; the final film was released at 8555 feet. The story is the largest and most expansive Chaplin film to date, the immensity of the project equaling the immensity of its subject. Walter Kerr observes that “Mythological expansion of the backgrounds [for the film] was ready made. The Alaskan gold rush was virtually the climax, hence an ultimate symbol, of a country’s discovery and mastery of its natural resources; a “mountain of gold” was the equivalent of every immigrant’s dream of “streets paved with gold.”²⁰ The optimism of the Tramp’s opening scenes is evident of this expectation; with a tip of his hat, he slides on his backside down the decline of the Chilkoot Pass. And, as he decides on a direction of travel, he consults his compass - -which is hand-drawn on a piece of paper. Any direction is equally promising. Chaplin echoes in these scenes Emerson’s mighty call in “Experience”:

I clap my hands in infantine joy and amazement, before the first opening to me of this August magnificence, old with the love and homage of innumerable ages, young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert. And what a future it opens! I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West.²¹

The Tramp's enthusiasm will sharply contrast the realities he encounters in the Alaskan wilderness.

As in *The Kid*, the exaggerated makeup and sets more fitting in the age of stagecraft were gone, as a new sense of photographic realism took over. Chaplin's unique style asserts itself with this film; as he writes in *My Autobiography*, "my own camera setup is based on facilitating choreography for the actor's movements. When a camera is placed on the floor or moves about the player's nostrils, it is the camera that is giving the performance and not the actor. The camera should not obtrude."²² The first four minutes of the film, in which Chaplin re-creates photographic scenes of miners making their way through the pass, have a documentary feel; one might be watching a Robert Flaherty film. Walter Kerr accurately observes that this footage "is harsh, clean, factual."²³ Only when the Tramp makes his appearance, the title describing him as "A lone prospector," does the tone of the film shift. Not only is the Tramp separate from the hundreds of other prospectors, his is clearly in a world of his own, or at least of his of character's making, as is evidenced by the single most anachronistic piece of his mining equipment: for his journey across snow fields, the Tramp carries his cane.

The Gold Rush breaks neatly into a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue. The formal structure allows for more narrative and character development, as the film is built from ongoing story elements rather than around gags. For the first time, Chaplin shot a film out of continuity; no doubt its formal structure helped keep the narrative elements in place during the massive task

of editing. The prologue introduces the Tramp, the nature of the story, and the date: 1898. Act I takes place in the cabin the Tramp has stumbled upon during a storm, where he is joined first by the villainous Black Larson and later by prospector Big Jim. Act II takes the Tramp from one cabin to another; he wanders into a mining city and eventually into the employ of a man leaving to check on his claim. The Tramp is left to care for the cabin. Act III takes the Tramp and Big Jim back to the original cabin, in search of Jim's claim. Finally, the epilogue concludes on ship, with the principals reunited.

A recurring theme throughout *The Gold Rush* is loneliness, and the Tramp's desire for companionship. The significance of this theme emerges in the second act of the film, while Chaplin is maintaining the cabin in the town, located across from the dance hall. In the first and third 'cabin' sequences, located in the wilderness, the Tramp seeks shelter for protection against the forces of nature; both sequences contain actions motivated by a raging storm. In the town sequences, the Tramp does not have nature to concern him, but the "storms" against which he protected himself before recur here as the forces of a society which he finds he cannot penetrate. A telling shot in this sequence is of the Tramp's first visit to the dance hall. Chaplin shows us the Tramp, from behind, looking into the very active room. The Tramp is in the foreground, at the center of the frame; to his left, we see a dance floor crowded with couples; to his right, a bar with much conversation and activity. On the balcony above many groups of people are eating and drinking. The figure of the Tramp appears so isolated from this scene that the shot almost looks like a process shot; the Tramp is very much in the foreground, almost a thoroughly black outline from behind, while the rest of the carefully composed action in the room appears in a wide range

of gray shadings. The shot serves to separate the Tramp completely from a self-enclosed social environment of which he is obviously not part.

It is in this section of the film that the Tramp meets Georgia, the woman he pines for and for whom he will prepare the fateful New Year's Eve dinner. Though the Tramp is comfortable in a relatively nice cabin, he is still obviously not a man of means, and Georgia and her friends have a joke at the Tramp's expense. Realizing that he is attracted to her, she plays on his loneliness, teasing him with casual flirtation, and sets a date for the Tramp to serve them a festive New Year's Eve dinner. The Tramp works assiduously around the town to afford the expense of the meal, and here several gags are arranged. Important to Chaplin's evolution as a narrative artist, the gags serve to further the story, and they grow organically from normal situations. This extends to the formal three act structure of the film; the acts are motivated by narrative means seamlessly, as the circumstances of the story develop according to their own necessity.

When New Year's Eve arrives, we see that the Tramp has prepared a lavish dinner (roasting a real bird rather than his boot, as in the first cabin sequence), complete with presents. As the appointed time for the dinner date, 8 p.m., comes and begins to pass by, we feel the dread of the inevitable. But before this happens, we are treated to a very fine gag, and another evocative Chaplin dream sequence. In this dream, his guests are present and his dinner party is a great success. When asked to deliver a speech, the Tramp cannot find the words, as he is overwhelmed by emotion. However, he does perform the famous "Oceana Roll" dance with forks stuck into bread loaves and his own facial expressions augment the performance. The gag itself is a Chaplin tour de force, and the exhilaration of the dance serves to contrast the reality of the Tramp's condition when is awakened by the shouts from the dance hall as the town celebrates the New

Year. The Tramp notices the time (and, disbelieving, first checks to make sure that the *clock* is not at fault), wanders to the dance hall to peer in, from the outside, at the celebration. The framing is a reminder of the first visit to the hall: the Tramp, seen from behind, looks through the window at the shadowy figures inside. Despair registers on his body as he slumps out of the frame, with the window-view of the party remaining. The party continues; it is the Tramp who must exit. The Tramp is worse than betrayed; he is forgotten. His despair is tangible as he realizes that, once again, the force of nature has isolated him, uncaring. Georgia and her friends have gone to the cabin to play more jokes on the Tramp, and Georgia discovers the party decorations and gifts. Realizing that the Tramp took her seriously, and realizing her guilt, she says to the others, “The joke’s gone too far. Let’s go.” However, it is noticeable that she makes no attempt the next day, or at anytime, to apologize for the joke.

As in *The Kid*, the landscape (as Walter Kerr suggested) is serious; however, in *The Gold Rush*, there are characters who are serious as well. We are first introduced to Black Larson as he is using his own “Wanted” posters for fuel in the wilderness cabin. When the Tramp arrives, Larson is a genuine threat to his life; only with the accidental arrival of Big Jim does the Tramp find an ally. Even here, in the struggle between Larson and Jim over the loaded gun, which always manages to point at the Tramp no matter how he tries to escape it, death seems aimed at the Tramp. The suggestion that this will be his fate is implied, and indeed the term “fate” appears in many of the film’s titles. When the decision is made to select one of the three to search for food in the wilderness, Black Larson loses the card cutting, and thus it is his fate (in a manner of speaking) to venture into the storm. When he comes upon two law officers on his trail, he shoots them and steals their provisions. There is no comedy here; the opportunity for a gag, which might

previously have proved too tempting to pass over, is left to a scene of unnerving death. The officers do not, for example, register their pain and beat a hasty retreat off screen, scrambling comically in the snow. Here, they simply fall dead, on screen, and their bodies are left to be scavenged. Larson does not, of course, return to the cabin; he does, however, come across Jim's claim, and when Jim discovers him there, Larson hits Jim in the head with a shovel and leaves him to die. Again, no gag here; the fact of nature is brutally real. We begin to wonder about the tone of the story, about whether the Tramp (and us, by extension) are simply victims of a harsh, uncaring universe. But as Black Larson leaves the site with a helping of gold from Jim's claim, the universe rights itself, morally speaking. A crevasse opens in the snow, and Larson, with his gain, is simply "swallowed" by the earth, as though the world will not tolerate this evil. It is as though Larson, like the revelers in the Valley of Sinai, is repaid in kind for his sin.

The external forces of nature here find their correspondence in the social forces that act upon the Tramp in the town. Just as Emerson declared that "every natural fact is a sign of a spiritual fact," the Tramp's existence in town is a non-existence. He is truly disengaged from the world, and is so cruelly mistreated by his idolized Georgia that his fate, if not for the intervention of Big Jim (which precipitates the film's third act) seems ominous, as though he might simply vanish, forgotten. Black Larson's attack did not kill Jim, but it did affect his memory: he knows he has a "mountain of gold," but he cannot remember where it is. His attempt in town to register his claim is useless, and when he discovers the Tramp, he agrees to split his fortune with him if he will lead them back to the cabin, where Jim can then find the claim. So, under much better circumstances, the two return to the pitiful wilderness cabin, to spend the night before setting off to find Jim's claim. However, again, nature acts upon them: the title reads, "Man proposes, but a storm

disposes,” which may again suggest that the moral balance implied in Black Larson’s death is coincidental. A violent storm blows the cabin, through the night, to the edge of a precipice and sliding further toward the two men’s deaths, save only for a knotted rope, attached to the cabin’s chimney at one end and caught on a rock at the other. The title reads, “And as our slumbering heroes slept throughout the storm - - fate guided them to a spot where all was calm.” It is as though the Fates have woven, measured, and are prepared to cut the Tramp’s thread of life, the ‘thread’ literally holding them above the pit of death.

This condition serves to illustrate the effectiveness of *The Gold Rush*. Before, a definitive characteristic of the Tramp has been, through the power of his imagination, his ability to bend the universe to his will; we are not accustomed to seeing the character unable to control his environment, not matter how unpromising his situation may seem. Throughout *The Gold Rush* the Tramp exists in one of two conditions: imminent death, or imminent abandonment, and there is little distinction between which fate is the worse of the two. In their monumental struggle to escape the doomed cabin, Jim gets out first and, as chance would have it, the storm has blown the cabin to the site of his claim; in his ecstasy, he forgets about the Tramp. Only by calling repeatedly to Jim (and, with each exertion, the cabin slides a bit further down), does Jim come back and offer the Tramp a rope. And, literally, as the Tramp is pulled from the door, the cabin sails out from under him. The next shot is of the two multi-millionaires, bound by ship for home, displaying extravagant wealth. The Tramp, it seems, has cheated fate, and has cheated his own death.

On ship the Tramp rediscovers Georgia, who is, perhaps, leaving for new adventures; she is traveling alone. We are given one suggestion as to her situation: the two titles bearing her name

in the dance hall sequences of the film display her name in an elaborate script, accompanied by a single rose in the top left corner, corresponding to the Tramp's romanticized view of her. When she is identified on ship, we see the same style of title, but now the rose has fallen to the bottom right corner, with its petals removed; she is perhaps leaving the town as a fallen, or deflowered, woman. Significantly, as opposed to the scene in the dance hall, the title identifies her to us *before* the Tramp sees her again; we are not privileged to his vision of her now. As the Tramp has agreed to change into his prospecting clothes for a press photo, Georgia believes him to be a stowaway and tries, unsuccessfully, to hide him. When the truth is revealed Georgia seems appropriately surprised, and her attraction to the Tramp is evident. Whether it is his new wealth, his genuine affection as he sees her again, or her sense of guilt that accounts for her attraction is left to our musing. But the Tramp surreptitiously identifies her to the photographer as his fiancée, and in a closing remarkably similar to the end of *The Immigrant*, the Tramp asserts the condition of their relationship without the overt compliance of the girl (at the end of *The Immigrant*, the Tramp picks up and carries Edna Purviance into the marriage office). Significantly the photographer comments, while the Tramp kisses Georgia, "You've spoilt the picture," meaning that the Tramp, as a "lone prospector," should not have a woman with him. But the end of the film also works against expectations created by other Chaplin "Tramp" films, where the Tramp wanders out of sight, to a destiny undetermined. Is this last comment, then, Chaplin's own direction at audience expectations - - that, by having the Tramp end the film wealthy and successfully mated, the nature of the Tramp character is subverted? This attitude may be countered somewhat by Georgia's interest in the Tramp. The film does not answer this possibility, or really offer evidence that the film's definite sense of closure works against *any*

preconceived notion regarding the Tramp. Still, it is a departure from more conventional Tramp films. Walter Kerr comments on the ending of *The Kid*: “Call it no ending, if you will. That is what Chaplin is always saying; no ending, no permanence, for him.”²⁴ Perhaps that Tramp’s final scene in *The Gold Rush* is not as permanent as we are led to think.

City Lights evolved into a more complex, but still formal, structure, as with *The Gold Rush*, but the film is Chaplin’s most directed social critique. Though still interested, as always, in the human condition, *City Lights* considers the institutions and circumstances which lead to the conditions in which we find ourselves. Like *The Gold Rush*, *City Lights* is also concerned with relationships - - the bonds which hold them together, the efforts necessary to maintain them, and the motivations which create them. *City Lights* takes place in a modern, urban city, a far remove from the desolation of *The Gold Rush*, and the social politics inherent in a crowded city come under Chaplin’s scrutiny.

The opening title declares *City Lights* to be a “romance-comedy,” and it is indeed a romance in the literary sense. The film is unmistakably American, with its millionaire, the poor, the disabled, and the opportunity to reinvent oneself to serve a particular purpose or for the purpose of social elevation (or both). Lewis Jacobs writes, “The theme of *City Lights* was basically a variation on what he had expressed before: protest against the crushing of the individual by social forces.”²⁵ This is certainly true of *The Kid*, *The Gold Rush*, and will reach its height with *Modern Times*. But the story is deeply moving and personal, while amazingly avoiding the kind of sentimentality possible in a film about one man’s desperate love for a poor blind girl. Part of this success is Chaplin’s complex plot involving the Tramp maintaining two opposing identities, counter plots which motivate each other, and the opportunity for beautifully choreographed gags to serve the

plot. François Truffaut observes that “Cinematic success is not necessarily the result of good brain work, but of a harmony of existing elements in ourselves that we may not have even been conscious of: a fortunate fusion of subject and our deeper feelings, an accidental coincidence of our own preoccupations at a certain moment of life and the public’s.”²⁶ Chaplin’s lifelong sympathy with the underprivileged, his concurrent motif of subverting social order to provide for someone else’s welfare, and his consciousness as an artist - - especially one offering a silent film eight years after the arrival of sound, and at a time when silent film was an anachronism - - Chaplin accomplished, in *City Lights*, a beautiful harmony of comedy romp, romance, and unparalleled emotional evocation.

The film opens with a self-enclosed sequence, not exactly in the style of a prologue (in that it does not introduce characters or situations), but seemingly more of a solo piece of acting for the Tramp. However, it does establish the setting of the film, Chaplin’s own commentary on the ‘question’ of sound films, and marks the film’s tone of social critique. In the city where the film takes place, a dedication ceremony is underway - - the unveiling of an enormous monument titled “Peace and Prosperity.” As the dignitaries on the platform begin to ‘speak,’ their voices are cacophonous, unintelligible sounds. According to David Robinson, the effect was produced by using sound synchronization of “jabbering saxophones which burlesqued the metallic tones of early talkie voices.”²⁷ As the statue is unveiled, the Tramp is discovered sleeping in the lap of the central figure. In the ensuing chaos, during which the Tramp is speared in the backside by a sword, (certainly a provocative symbol) and during which, try as he might, he cannot keep his balance as the police and the audience snap to attention, Pavlov-like, at the playing of the national anthem, the Tramp finally takes his leave, and the scene closes. The tone has indeed been

established, and the Tramp's maneuvers on the monument, even if not intended to serve as symbolic commentary, are certainly funny. Also, the unintelligibility of the speeches serves to mock the popularity of the talkies as well as undercut the significance of the speakers and their reverential attitudes - - after all, Chaplin is showing us the self-important revealing of "Peace and Prosperity" in a upscaled urban environment, while a homeless tramp is using the monument for shelter. This duality, between the pretense of wealth and the reality of poverty, underlies the entire film.

The film's story begins with a very nice opening shot of a large gathering of flowers, which fades into a portrait shot of Virginia Cherrill as the blind flower girl. She becomes the Tramp's object of affection; he clearly idolizes her, perhaps not the least because she cannot see that he *is* a tramp. Emerson writes in his essay "Art," "the power to detach, and to magnify by detaching, is the essence of rhetoric in the hands of the orator and the poet. . . . The power depends on the depth of the artist's insight of that object he contemplates. For every object has its roots in central nature, and may of course may be so exhibited to us as to represent the world."²⁸ This power is achieved by Chaplin's camera through the caring view of the Tramp; after he buys his flower and is mistaken for a wealthy patron, he sneaks away, only to come back to watch the beautiful blind girl. Chaplin dispenses with any rising sentimentality in this sequence when the Tramp gets a face full of water as the girl dumps out her container. But Chaplin has established the romanticized beauty of the flower girl in this scene, and, because of her blindness, she indeed comes to represent the world's 'blindness' to the plight of its less fortunate citizens - - such as the Tramp's position indicates, or as is indicated by the fact that, while sober and rational, the millionaire refuses to recognize the Tramp, but when drunk ('blind' drunk, we may assume), he

engages the Tramp as an equal. The motivation for the Tramp to keep up a false front in her presence is motivated by the girl, and the film's ending is certainly a revelation, which indeed has its roots "in central nature."

Once the story elements and characters are in place, the structure of the film develops in the only manner it possibly can. Walter Kerr writes that

it is the most ingeniously formed, immaculately interlocked of Chaplin's experiments in combining comedy with pathos. The comedy and the love story depend utterly on each other; neither can move until the other requires it to do so. If there is a prizefighting sequence, hilarious in itself, or a street-sweeping sequence or a soap-sandwich sequence, it is only because Charlie must attempt these things in order to find money for the blind girl he loves. No gag is gratuitous; it grows directly out of the need of a helpless girl and her knight unvaliant.²⁹

The film is driven by this dual bind. The Tramp maintains his false front to the girl while trying to get money for the operation that will restore her sight. But if he *can* raise the money, she will be able to see that he is not what she believes him to be. He can only keep up the pretense as long as she cannot see him; he can only be satisfied in his desire for her if he can get the money she needs. As well, he can only do so by playing the friend for the drunk millionaire, and being willing to take his abuse when the man is sober. Finally, in between encounters with the millionaire, he must take on prizefighting or street sweeping, while trying to keep up the manner of a man of leisure when with his girl. Again, Kerr offers an interesting perspective on this dual bind:

What is finally at stake is Chaplin's archetypal ambivalence, his delightful / disastrous duality, brought at last to ultimate confrontation. Ever since Chaplin arrived at his complex identity, he has been two things at once: he has been nobody and everybody, and he has been nobody because he can be everybody. But what does that mean, apart from the pain it occasionally gives him when he realizes he can sustain no one role for long? It means that the problem is not exclusively personal, though it is acutely personal for him. The problem would *have* to be universal or Charlie could not get away with his pretenses at all.³⁰

Once the pattern is in place, and the Tramp has committed himself to the dual role, we have the sense that a race is underway. The plots do not necessarily run parallel; as Kerr suggests, one plot necessitates an appropriate reaction in the other plot. We know watching this moving back and forth, at increasing pace throughout the film, that the Tramp cannot maintain the ruse forever, and that at some point, the two paths will come into contact, and the truth will be revealed. These paths are converging, and the harder the Tramp works to keep them apart, the more of himself is used up in the process. There are only so many prizefights, day jobs, and all-night drunken parties he can stand; and this in light of the fact that when he gets what he wants (the money for the girl's operation), he will lose what he wants (the girl). So why does he do it? What is the Tramp's motivation?

Part of the answer may lie in the understanding of the Tramp as symbol. The two qualities sustaining the Tramp as symbol are the pursuit of beauty and truth. Emerson writes, "historically viewed, it has been the office of art to educate the perception of beauty. We are immersed in beauty, but our eyes have no clear vision."³¹ The fact of vision as the subject of Chaplin's film is no mere coincidence. Robinson notes that "Chaplin had rarely before begun a film with an idea of how it would end. Certainly never before had he described a final scene in such detail, almost like a shooting script, long before he had begun to shoot. But he knew already that this scene was to be the climax, perhaps the very *raison d'être* of *City Lights*."

Thus it seems the final scene of the film was the germ from which the narrative eventually grew; this suggests a weighty significance on what that scene would represent. This scene, of course, is the point in which the plot lines converge, in which the girl realizes that the Tramp is

her benefactor. The consequences of this scene are powerful indeed. In a sense, its actualization illustrates an aesthetic condition of cinema itself. André Bazin considers the problem this way:

Every form of aesthetic must necessarily choose between what is worth preserving and what should be discarded, and what should not even be considered. But when this aesthetic aims in essence at creating the illusion of reality, as does the cinema, this choice sets up a fundamental contradiction which is at once unacceptable and necessary: necessary because art can only exist when such a choice is made. . . . Unacceptable because it would be done definitely at the expense of that reality which the cinema proposes to restore integrally.³²

This is the situation of the Tramp, and a living symbol of the human condition, as expressed through this film: what is real, what is illusion, and what is worth preserving?

The Tramp takes advantage of the drunken millionaire's unknowing generosity after a night on the town, to secure money for the girl's rent and operation. However, a robbery at the millionaire's house results in the millionaire being hit on the head, which serves to sober him, the robbers escape, and the Tramp, with the money, is taken by the police to be the thief. Since the millionaire cannot recognize him, the Tramp is apprehended. But, he does escape the police long enough to get the money to the girl and bid her farewell.

Several years pass, and the Tramp, back on the street after his release from prison, is in the worst shape the character has ever been. It is alarming for us to see the Tramp so entirely disheveled. In the past, a large part of the Tramp's charm, and his humanity, was his ability to maintain a sense of decorum, all the while still a tramp. The exterior is deceiving. Emerson writes that "The primary use of a fact is low; the secondary use, as it is a figure or illustration of my thought, is the real worth."³³ The Tramp is the primary fact in this case; man's dignity, his essential moral worth, is the real worth. But after his release from prison, even this quality of the Tramp is gone. Chaplin plays the role with utter conviction; his pantomime of a man completely

devoid of spirit or value is soul-rending. The film's ending sequence begins where the film's story began (after the opening tableaux); the Tramp passes the same street corner, and the obnoxious newspaper kids begin again to abuse him. Early in the film the Tramp gave them as much a comeuppance as he could muster; now, he barely has the strength of will to reply. He is unaware that behind him the girl operates, along with her grandmother, what appears to be quite a profitable flower shop. As she dresses flower arrangements, and checks her hair using a mirror, we know that she has had the operation; we also know that she longs for her benefactor to return. As the alley refuse is being swept into the street, the Tramp sees a wilted flower in the gutter. He bends to pick it up, and he looks into the shop, and here the paths finally merge, and time seems to stand still, the shot seems like, or at least has the feel of, a freeze frame. The camera is set up inside the flower shop, looking over Virginia Cherrill's head, past the beautiful window arrangements, and, through the glass, we see the Tramp's reaction as he sees her. His look meets her sight line, and we feel as though we are inside a privileged, highly personal moment. The effect of the shot is paralyzing; all of the film's frenetic pacing has closed on this one shot. Chaplin holds the shot for a few seconds, just long enough to realize its effect, before the reverse shot of the girl, who, laughing, says (via title), "I've made a conquest."

As she offers him a fresh flower, and a coin, the Tramp tries to escape, but something, perhaps a moment of decision - - should he stay, or run? - - makes him hesitant. His greatest wish and his greatest fear are happening at the same time; he does not seem to know which instinct to follow. Before he can decide, he takes the flower, and the girl catches his hand and presses the coin into it, and all of the past comes back in a flash of recognition. James Agee describes the moment beautifully:

He recognizes himself, for the first time, through the terrible changes in her face. The camera just exchanges a few quiet close-ups of the emotions which shift and intensify in each face. It is enough to shivel the heart to see, and it is the greatest piece of acting and the highest moment in movies.³⁴

The changes in the girl's expression are virtually indescribable. In writing of cinema's silence, Stanley Cavell writes,

there is a further reality that film pursues, the further, continuous reality in which the words we need are *not* synchronized with the occasion of their need or in which their occasions flee them. . . . I have . . . in mind the pulsing air of incommunicability which may nudge the edge of any experience and placement . . . occasions which will not reach words for me now, and if not now, never.³⁵

This is the effect of the girl's realization: words cannot convey the experience of her feeling.

Finally, she says, simply, "You?"; the Tramp nods, barely. He asks, "You can see now?", to which, after a few moments she replies, "Yes, I can see now." The camera has been more closely attentive to the Tramp's face during this exchange; Chaplin cuts back to the girl only as she registers - - what emotion? It is hard to determine - - and delivers her first line; there is a reverse cut to the Tramp as he nods; a cut to the girl for her final line; and a quick cut back to the Tramp, as he smiles, but with his hand holding the flower covering his mouth, as though he is happy, but afraid to be happy, relieved and scared at the revelation of his identity, awaiting the girl's next expression. The camera does not reveal this moment to us; perhaps it is a moment too personal even for Chaplin's cinema. The shot fades on the Tramp's smile, and the questionable ambiguity of *The Gold Rush's* ending is made more ambiguous here.

Emerson writes that "Spirit is matter reduced to an extreme thinness: O *so thin!* - - But the definition of *spiritual* should be, *that which is its own evidence.*"³⁶ In this final shot of *City Lights*, matter, or, the *materiality* of the expressions exchanged, have the feeling of "thinness," as

though the faces register pure emotion to the point that the veil between the faces dissipates. A truth about the world may also be suspected in the double meaning of the Tramp's word "see." When he asks the question, he seems to be addressing her physical sight (which to him should be apparent, and not necessitating the question), and her insight, or her perception (which to him is still a mystery). Does she, indeed, "see" the duality established by the film's opening sequence: the Tramp invading the monument to "Peace and Prosperity?" Emerson comments, by way of parable, on the duality of the poet:

To every plant there are two powers; one shoots down as rootlet, and one upward as tree. You must have eyes of science to see in the seed its nodes; you must have the vivacity of the poet to perceive in the thought its futurities. The poet is representative, - - whole man, diamond-merchant, symbolizer, emancipator; in him the word projects a scribe's hand and writes the adequate genesis. The nature of things is flowing, a metamorphosis. The free spirit sympathizes not only with the actual form, but with the power of possible forms; but for obvious municipal or parietal uses God has given us a bias or a rest on to-day's forms. Hence the shudder of joy with which in each clear moment we recognize the metamorphosis, because it is a conquest, a surprise from the heart of things.³⁷

The Tramp is symbolizer, the emancipator; is the girl's expression, to which we are not privileged, this "shudder of joy?" The moment of revelation in this final scene of the film is the clear moment, the metamorphosis. The Tramp has, and it is in his character, to sympathize with "the power of possible forms." Chaplin offers us this moment of clarity in *City Lights*; whether the girl, to whom this metamorphosis matters so heavily, will realize this as well is left to the indeterminable space off screen, to the continual space beyond the frame of our awareness.

Notes

1. Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975), 85.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 159.
3. James Agee, *Agee on Film Volume I* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Universal Library Edition, 1969), 9.
4. Emerson, "History," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume II: Essays: First Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.
5. Emerson, *The Divinity School Address*, in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 81.
5. Ibid., 77-78.
7. Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 396.
8. Ibid., 235-38.
9. David Robinson notes that the car used for the scene belonged to D. W. Griffith (253).
10. Kerr, 171.
11. Robinson, 253-54.
12. Quoted in Robinson, 109.
13. François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*. Trans. Leonard Mayhew (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 62.
14. Chaplin, 382-83.
15. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition, volume VIII: Letters and Social Aims*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 13.
16. Robinson, 292.
17. Chaplin, 323.

18. Emerson, *Nature*, 41.
19. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 27.
20. Kerr, 247.
21. Emerson, "Experience," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume III: Essays: Second Series*. Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 41.
22. Ibid., 255.
23. Kerr, 247.
24. Ibid., 177.
25. Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Teacher's College Press, Columbia University, 1968), 245.
26. Truffaut, 15.
27. Robinson, 401.
28. Emerson, "Art," *Essays: First Series*, 211.
29. Kerr, 346.
30. Ibid., 347.
31. Emerson, "Art," *Essays: First Series*, 210.
32. André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume II*. Ed. and Trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 26.
33. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 11.
34. Agee, 10.
35. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 147-48.
36. Emerson, "Experience," *Essays: Second Series*, 31.
37. Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 71.

Chapter 11

Modern Times: Resignation

In his introduction to André Bazin's book of essays on Chaplin, Jean Bodon writes, "Chaplin invented an alter ego which best represented our intrinsic needs in a more and more demanding society, an alter ego on the scale of twentieth century man: a simple character facing the complexity of the industrial world."¹ This is most appropriate regarding Chaplin's last film as the Tramp, *Modern Times*, released in 1936. Bazin observes that *Modern Times* proposes no single scenes illustrating any particular abstract idea; "the idea emerges from a situation which breaks loose in all directions. Can we really talk about ideas? They are only by-products, the residue of this mythology of the modern world which expresses itself in the struggles of man with industrial society."² The opening title is set against the image of a huge clock. The title reads: "*Modern Times* is a story of industry, of individual enterprise, of human crusading in pursuit of happiness." The opening shot of the film - - crowds of sheep running through a gate to be slaughtered, cross-fading into a shot of crowds of men running upstairs and through the gates of a huge steel factory - - sets the ominous tone of the times. The Tramp's nineteenth century gentility is anachronistic in this environment.

Though the film is regarded a 'silent' film, it is not a quiet one; Chaplin uses sound synchronization to create waves of noise, chatter, and a voice for a factory executive projected through a video screen and a salesman's pitch on a phonograph player. There remains, however, the silence of the Tramp, nor do the other characters on screen speak. It is evident, though, that this is the last film in which this will be possible. Making *City Lights* as a silent film in 1931 was thought by critics and producers to be a career-ending move; indeed, Chaplin had great difficulty

finding a theater to premier the film. Making *Modern Times* as a 'silent film' in 1936 is a statement *about* silence, and about the social forces that have killed it. Likewise, Chaplin was forty-two years old when making this film; how far into middle age could he maintain the character? Bodon observes about André Bazin the accurate assessment that

unlike most people, Bazin not only understood but accepted that there was a man behind the creation; he understood the dramatic relationship between Chaplin and the little tramp. Unlike most, Bazin understood that from *Modern Times* to *Limelight* Chaplin was showing that his own aging meant the irrevocable death of the little tramp.³

Chaplin does not kill the character; he could not possibly do so, given the Tramp's enormous, universal appeal. He realizes that the Tramp can no longer exist; he can no longer remain in context of urban, mechanized society.

Though the film's opening sequence occurs in a factory filled with huge machinery suggestive of German expressionism, Walter Kerr observes, interestingly, that only one fourth of the film takes place in a factory or in reference to a factory. The film is, Kerr asserts, a human story.⁴ As well, David Robinson notes that some critics were disappointed in the fact that Chaplin had not made a political film. Robinson writes,

Modern Times is an emotional response, based always in comedy, to the circumstances of the times. In the Keystone and Essanay films the Tramp was knocked around in a pre-war society of underprivilege among other immigrants and vagrants and petty miscreants. In *Modern Times* he is one of the millions coping with poverty, unemployment, strikes and strike-breakers, and the tyranny of the machine.⁵

However, though, the theme of the individual crushed by the wave of mechanization is present, at least in part. In fact, it is this idea which provokes the first of the events which characterizes the structure of the film. The Tramp is seen working on a rapidly-paced assembly line, tightening bolts with deadening regularity. When the Tramp has a break due and turns his wrenches over to

his temporary replacement on the line, he continues the twitchy motion of tightening the bolts. It appears as though the Tramp has become physically conditioned to his job by its sheer repetition. While he tries to have a quick smoke in the restroom, a huge video surveillance screen appears; his boss orders him (with a mechanical, projected voice) to “get back to work!” The Tramp hustles back in quick obedience. Still, André Bazin defends the film against any overt political or social statement:

It is nothing less than a *film à thèse* and if Chaplin asserts himself in it effectively by portraying the individual against society and its machines, his assertion does not approach either the political or sociological plane, but rather aims at the moral plane and as always through his artistry. The creative process moves forward through comic expression, and the awareness developed is the perfect *mise-en-scène* of the situation.

Charlot⁶ is not aware of class structure, and if he is on the side of the proletariat, it is objectively because he is also a victim of society and police. (The repression of the strike in the film, though brutal, does not surpass the events of that time.)

Rather than seeing Charlot on the side of the poor, it would be better to say that the poor are on Charlot's side; that is to say, in effect on the side of mankind, but it is, however, the tramp's integral individualism which remains the pivot of all situations.⁷

It may be more accurate to consider *Modern Times* a film concerned with the antagonistic relationship between the romantic and the mechanized worlds. The Tramp returns to work, and eventually lunch time arrives. The company executive has, in the meantime, been approached by the inventor of a “feeding machine” that will allow the worker to eat while working on the line, therefore increasing productivity. Again, Chaplin uses a voice in this scene, but only to point out its absurdity. The sales delivery is made by “the mechanical salesman,” a phonograph record which pitches the benefits of the machine while the inventor stands by smugly. In fact, with the very brief exception of the singing waiters near the film's end, all the intelligible voices in the film are produced, unnecessarily, by machines. Chaplin points out the absurd overindulgence in

mechanization, while at the same time demonstrating that the mechanized voice has replaced the human voice. The reproduction of the voice is *not* the voice itself, and it is this Chaplin is exposing. Chaplin, personally, felt that talking pictures would not last, and if so, that they would exist in combination with silent films, which encouraged the art of pantomime and suggestion. Robinson writes,

Chaplin had made the silent pantomime into an international language. He had proved that the gestures, the expressions, the quirks, the thoughts, the feelings of his little Tramp were as readily comprehensible to Japanese, Chinese, Bantu tribesmen or Uzbekhs as to the great cinema audiences of America or Europe. Speech would instantly rob the figure of this universality. In any case, how would he speak? What kind of voice and accent could be conceived to suit the Tramp? This was a conundrum that was still puzzling him more than thirty years after he parted from the character.⁸

Modern Times is, in fact, a silent film, most evidently so because very nearly all of it is shot at silent speed; the voiced portions of the film are shot accordingly at sound speed, but the visual actions on these occasions are so orchestrated as to blend the shift smoothly, without notice.⁹

Chaplin, the last director to utilize sound, had serious reservations about its value with his style of comedy; nevertheless, as Robinson points out, Chaplin had realized the inevitability of sound.

Early in 1931 Chaplin predicted a life of between six months and one year for the talkies, "Then they're done." Three months later, he qualified this statement by saying, "Dialogue may or may not have a place in comedy . . . What I merely said was that dialogue does not have a place in the sort of comedies I make . . . For myself I know that I cannot use dialogue."¹⁰ Chaplin was still undecided, and had indeed done sound tests of dialogue scenes between the Tramp and Paulette Goddard, which proved unsatisfactory to Chaplin's comic needs.

Stanley Cavell considers the acknowledgment of silence in films an ontological condition, given film's commitment to the reproduction of the real; there is a further reality that film pursues,

the “further, continuous reality in which the words we need are *not* synchronized with the occasions of their need or in which their occasions flee them. . . . spools of history that have unwound only to me now, occasions which will not reach words for me.”¹¹ Cavell’s point about the inexpressability of emotions which escape the confines of language acknowledges that silence may be as expressive as language. For Emerson, these emotions exist as symbols, and primarily in his writing as visual symbols, to be *interpreted into* language (by the poet). Chaplin expresses the same concern in a different way:

For years I have specialized in one type of comedy - - strictly pantomime. I have measured it, gauged it, studied. I have been able to establish exact principles to govern its reactions on audiences. It has a certain pace and tempo. Dialogue, to my way of thinking, always slows action, because action must wait upon words.¹²

The last statement may be read in two ways: action must wait upon words in the sense that action moves more quickly than language in comedy (certainly in pantomime); and, perhaps, action must wait upon words, as though words, when present, claim dominance, and the action must wait upon them, as to support or to serve them. Cavell asserts that

a world of sight is a world of immediate intelligibility. With talkies we got back the clumsiness of speech, the dumbness and duplicities and concealments of assertion, the bafflement of soul and body by their inarticulateness and by their terror of articulateness. Technical improvements will not overcome these ontological facts; they only magnify them. These ontological facts are tasks of art, as of existence. The advent of sound broke the spell of immediate intelligibility.¹³

While many directors, especially Griffith, longed for the added verisimilitude that sound would offer motion pictures, Chaplin’s resistance was based on his feeling that silence was not a deficiency of films, but constituted another *kind* of film. In a sense, as Cavell seems to suggest, the immediate reaction to the image must wait for the intellect to process the sound, significance,

and take into account the context of the accompanying word. Some quality of the silent film, close to intuitive understanding, seems to be lost. Again, Cavell comments:

There is another half to the idea of conveying the unsayable by showing experience beyond the reach of words. It is conveyed by freeing the motion of the body for its own lucidity. The body's lucidity is not dependent upon slowing and flashing and freezing it and juxtaposing it to itself over cuts and superimpositions. It was always a part of the grain of film that, however studied the lines and set the business, the movement of the actors was essentially improvised - - as in those everyday actions in which we walk through a new room or lift a cup in an unfamiliar locale or cross a street or greet a friend or look in a store window to accept an offered cigarette.¹⁴

All of Cavell's examples suggest business on which the Tramp has improvised, or the kinds of simple situations on which he could create actions describing his situation, circumstance, or character, in a way unique to the artistry of Chaplin. Chaplin's sense of the threat of sound seems valid in this context.

Walter Kerr criticizes a significant moment in *Modern Times* for what he perceives as misuse, or rather misintegration, of sound. The scene occurs close to the end of the film; the Gamin has landed a job for the Tramp as a singer in the café where she is working. As the moment for the Tramp's number approaches, there is a quartet in the restaurant, just beyond the open dressing room door, already performing. This is Kerr's complaint:

We have seen *and heard* the quartet march onto the floor and begin its number. As we cut to the dressing room where Paulette [Goddard, in the role of the Gamin] is encouraging Charlie and helping him memorize his lines, we continue to hear the song from the floor - - firmly fixed at sound speed. But Charlie and the girl are not only bobbing about in a much livelier silent rhythm, they are conversing in titles. Here sound has been allowed to proclaim itself dominant; we know that Charlie is going to join it in a moment. The titles surprise us, set against the singing voices. Two worlds do not quite mate.¹⁵

As a start, I would assert that two worlds not quite mating has been a dynamic force driving the Tramp's films for quite a while. But I think Kerr misses a key moment, earlier in the sequence.

When the Gamin brings the Tramp to the café for the first time, the manager asks him if he can wait tables. The Tramp, unsure, looks to the Gamin, who answers in the affirmative. Then the manager asks the Tramp, “Can you sing?” Again, the Tramp, with a look of oncoming desperation, looks to the Gamin, who again assures the manager he can sing. The manager agrees to give him a trial. After he leaves the room, the Tramp, with a look of fear, pantomimes to the girl that he cannot sing, and moves his nervous fingers to his throat. He appeals to her with a helpless shrug, but he is trapped into performing. Without doubt this sets up the Tramp’s unlikely performance, but the moment of realizing that he is expected to try and sing contains the real significance, for it is Chaplin’s reaction as well to nine years of expectation regarding the Tramp’s voice. Though the Tramp does sing the song, the lyrics are nonsense; the “words” are only word-like sounds, and the narrative of the song is made clear by the Tramp’s pantomime. Indeed, even if the song had credible lyrics, the pantomime would still have been more evocative of the song’s story. There is a subtle distinction lurking here: the Tramp, though he has had the ability to speak for nine years, does not *choose* not to speak, but *has no voice with which to speak*. The Tramp’s “speech” is his body, his self, his totality of expression, is more expressive than language. The Tramp’s, and Chaplin’s, hold on us is his intuitive sense of human dignity and his almost mystical relationship with the world and its most humble characters: Edna Purviance, Jackie Coogan, Georgia Hale, Virginia Cherril, Paulette Goddard. When the Tramp does utilize his voice, what comes out is exactly what one might expect from a character whose engagement with the world is entirely intuitive: his verbal “communication” is gibberish - - it makes no sense. The Tramp cannot speak the language of the modern world.

Much had changed in the five years since *City Lights*. Transition techniques such as the iris effect and wipes were for the most part gone, replaced by more direct cuts and dissolves. Also, there was a new element making its way into the motion picture business: film trick work done in the laboratory. Walter Kerr criticizes the (admittedly) poor quality of the one process shot in *Modern Times*: the Tramp, working at a shipyard, is sent to find a substantial-sized wedge. He finds one, but discovers when he moves it that it had been holding a hull under construction in place. We see, from behind the Tramp, the unfinished hull slip into, and below, the water. The two elements of the scene were, as Kerr notes, quite obviously not photographed in the same place. However, the process shot was a developing technology, and much depended on the quality of the material with which to work (for this reason a similarly done process shot in Hitchcock's 1966 film *Torn Curtain* is no better).¹⁶ Process shots, certainly by 1936 standards, depended on the quality of the original filmic elements to be combined as well as the technology and experience of the laboratory technicians. The shot about which Kerr complains is the "punch line" of a gag, and of little consequence to the story. It seems, after all, a minor concern.

The plot structure of *Modern Times* is not as complex as that of *City Lights*, nor as formal as that of *The Gold Rush*. The narrative components that motivate the story's movement surround the Tramp's forced enclosure in a public institution; the first of these is the mental hospital where he is confined after his nervous breakdown, brought on by mind-numbing (or, imagination-numbing) factory work. Chaplin wrote, in 1964, that "in the creation of comedy, it is paradoxical that tragedy stimulates the spirit of ridicule, because ridicule, I suppose, is an attitude of defiance: we must laugh in the face of our helplessness against the forces of nature - - or go insane."¹⁷ This is the case in the first factory sequence in *Modern Times*. The Tramp is adhered to his position on

the assembly line, his one break is cut short, and even his lunch is mangled. He is chosen by the company boss to try out the new “Billows Feeding Machine.” The Tramp is strapped into the machine, upright so that he may continue to work, while a rotating tray and various levers circulate a selection of food items and nudge them into his mouth. And, for courtesy, an automatic mouth-wiper intervenes after each course to “insure against spots on the shirt-front.” At first the machine operates as designed; then, of course, the machine short-circuits. The turntable flies around; food is pressed into the Tramp’s face, dumped onto his chest, bolts are shoved into his mouth, and all the while the mouth-wiper continues to function normally, a bizarre image of genteel mannerism in the chaotic environment. Eventually, too, the mouth-wiper has had enough of gentility, and, as a topper to the madness, begins to pound the Tramp’s mouth. The machine takes on Kafkaesque stature; mechanics work on the crazed machine while the Tramp is still connected to it, unable to get free.

By the time the Tramp is disconnected from the machine his lunch break is over, and work resumes. Orders from the disembodied executive to the dynamo operator (a bare-chested, machine-like man himself, integrated into the shot of endlessly aligned dynamos, the image recalls Lang’s *Metropolis*) command more speed on the line; the Tramp’s pace increases to the breaking point, in a real sense. The Tramp, determined (or, conditioned) to tighten one bolt that has slipped past him, is ingested by the machine itself. This beautiful set piece shows the Tramp caught in the cogs inside the machine, being moved along as a part of the machine. Instinctively, he tightens any bolts within reach of his wrenches. The Tramp’s expression indicates the onset of madness. As the machine is reversed, the Tramp emerges, and “his nervous breakdown, danced among the dynamos,”¹⁸ begins in earnest. He prances along the line, spraying everyone with oil,

as though lubricating fellow machines. He begins to apply his wrenches to anything resembling bolts: worker's noses, pairs of buttons on women's clothing. At one point, upon seeing the boss' secretary, the wrenches become the Tramp's "horns," the visual pun intact (he has already attempted to "tighten" the buttons on her skirt); the wrenches become part of the man himself, manifesting a condition of instinctual human behavior. When a worker manages to get to the line's control lever and turn off the conveyor, the workers chase the Tramp around the machine; but, inevitably, the Tramp reaches the lever before he is caught, and when he turns the machine on again, the workers instantly, Pavlovian, snap back to work. The Tramp's eventual capture leads to his first imprisonment: he is confined to a mental institution.

A nervous breakdown is a new experience for the Tramp character. Until now, he has been able to utilize objects, no matter how unlikely, in a way that will suit his needs. In this case, the machine is just too big, the mechanical forces too overwhelming, to be manipulated or controlled by the sheer will of the imagination. When the Tramp's imagination does emerge, it is seen as madness. Henri Bergson offers his law of why this machine-play is funny:

The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.

If we devote our whole attention to the drawing with the firm resolve to think of nothing else [dismissing the satire of the drawing], we shall probably find that it is generally comic in proportion to the clearness, as well as the subtleness, with which it enables us to see a man as a jointed puppet. The suggestion must be a clear one, for inside the person we must distinctively perceive, as though through a glass, a set-up mechanism. But the suggestion must also be a subtle one, for the general appearance of the person whose every limb has been made rigid as a machine, must continue to give us the impression of a living being. The more exactly these two images, that of a person and that of a machine, fit into each other, the more striking is the comic effect, and the more consummate the art of the draughtsman.¹⁹

Bergson's example is that of a sketch artist, but the principle, I believe, is the same. The Tramp becomes funny in proportion to how closely he comes to resemble the actions of the machine. The clear suggestion is evidenced by the Tramp's conditioned behavior to follow out his job duties (the bolt tightening) in *any* environment; the set-up mechanism is this conditioning. The subtle suggestion is, of course, that he still looks, and in some degree acts, like the Tramp we have become familiar with. But the effect of the comedy is, as Bergson suggests, the degree of integration between man and machine; they do "fit into each other" (the Tramp is fed bolts, his wrenches become horns, symbolic of his desire; he is fed into the inner workings of the machine, where he feels completely at ease). The tragedy of this particular situation, however, is that the Tramp has always been able to deal effectively with his environment; here, we feel his helplessness.

The Tramp's eventual release from the hospital leads directly to his encounter with the Gamin, a "motherless child of the waterfront," who lives with her little sisters and laborer father in a waterfront shanty. The father is unemployed - - Chaplin makes good use of a close up of him, showing deeply felt despair - - but he has his children to keep him happy in their semblance of a home. The story of the Gamin runs parallel to that of the Tramp as he leaves the hospital. Finding the factory closed, the Tramp wanders the streets. As he does, he sees a warning flag (we may safely assume it is a *red* flag) fall from the back of a lumber truck. Always willing to help, the Tramp tries to use the flag to signal the driver, just as a mob of striking workers rounds the corner behind. As he walks down the street after the truck, he is unknowingly and unwillingly heading up a march. Police arrive to break up the march - - with guns and clubs - - and the Tramp, still with the flag, is arrested as being the leader. Thus he finds his second imprisonment:

this time, he is in prison as a communist leader (though a title indicates that the “innocent victim languishes in jail” - - clearly the Tramp is no communist).

In the parallel story, there is trouble along the waterfront, and the Gamin's father is killed when another worker riot is broken up. Afterward, as her sisters are being led away to an orphanage, the Gamin manages to escape. While the Tramp is in prison, she takes his place on the street. It seems destined that their lots will fall together. It has been suggested by Kerr that the Gamin serves as the Tramp's alter ego, his equal in resourcefulness in terms of survival, and a suitable partner for the Tramp. Kerr suggests that while the Tramp is ever homeless, wandering in and out of sequences without direction, the Gamin symbolizes the side of the Tramp that would like to be domestic, living within society's norms, in a “real home.”²⁰ However, several facts work against this idea. For one (and this Kerr does acknowledge) is that the girl is underage; certainly this is territory Chaplin does not want to approach in his films. Kerr notes that, regarding the sequence in which the Tramp and the Gamin are sharing a tumbledown shack in which the girl sleeps in the shack while the Tramp sleeps in the doghouse, that the film reminds us that the relationship is platonic, and only a friendly one. However, I suspect that the National Board of Review is reminding us of this fact, as it is clear in their interactions that the Tramp and the Gamin are affectionately attached. In the Tramp's fantasy sequence, in which he describes the two living together in a nice suburban home, the fantasy is inspired by the two watching an exuberantly happy housewife kissing her husband goodbye as he leaves for work. The sequence the Tramp describes afterward suggests that their relationship in such a home would differ in no way from that of a happily married couple.

During the Tramp's incarceration, he successfully disrupts a prison break. He does so while under the influence of drugs (he has accidentally taken in a quantity of smuggled "nose powder" during a search), reminiscent of the Tramp's drug-induced heroics in saving Edna from the addict in *Easy Street*. After the foiled break, the Tramp lives a very cozy prison life; his cell (complete with a pinup of Abraham Lincoln) is left open and he entertains friendly visits from the guards. A radio announcement informs us that the Governor has pardoned the Tramp, who is reluctant to leave; life in prison is certainly better for him than the chaos of life of the street. However, he must go, and his release leads to his inevitable encounter with the Gamin.

The Gamin, "Alone - - and hungry," steals a loaf of bread and, while running away, runs - - headlong - - into the Tramp. Here the two storylines, quite literally, collide. From this point forward, the couple will be inseparable. As a policeman arrives, the Tramp, happy at the opportunity to return to prison (and, again, demonstrating his gentlemanly manner), claims responsibility for the theft; he is summarily launched into the back of a police van. But, the Gamin is identified by an eyewitness as the actual culprit, and she is detained, and the Tramp released. Immediately, and with an attitude of seeming indignance, the Tramp marches into a cafeteria and enjoys a massive feast, a nice contrast to the girl's attempt to steal a single loaf of bread. He summons a police officer, informs him that he cannot pay, and is apprehended legitimately and ushered into the van. As the van makes its rounds, the Gamin is picked up, and she and the Tramp are reunited. However, she will not be heading for the Tramp's (comparatively) luxurious prison life; she will be taken to the orphanage. As she bolts toward the guard at the rear of the van, the Tramp close behind to stop her, the coincidence of the van's swerving to miss an oncoming car with the struggle sends all three - - Tramp, Gamin, and guard - - flying into the

street. The Tramp regains his senses first, revives the Gamin, and encourages her to make a break for it; it is obvious that he intends to stay behind. She does so, down the street and around a corner. But before disappearing she motions for the Tramp to join her, and we see a look of indecision cross his face. He must choose his fate, and the choice will not be easy. Wanting to return to prison, but clearly attracted to the girl, he weighs his options as the policeman begins to come around. An extra bop on the head (which the Tramp administers with the policeman's own club) gives him a minute more to decide, and he takes off after the girl. They are joined by mutual decision, and their life together will be a challenge of survival. Unfortunately, the Tramp is poised against forces he cannot overcome (as demonstrated by the nervous breakdown); fortunately, he is not alone.

It is at this point in the film when, after wandering into a suburban neighborhood (another first in a Tramp film), they see the happily married couple and the Tramp describes their "dream life" together. However, his description of their fine dinner serves to remind her of her hunger, and they wander off again, toward town. Fortunately, for a change the Tramp is in the right place at the right time: a night watchman at a department store has broken his leg, and the Tramp, still bearing his letter of recommendation from the prison warden, is awarded the job on the spot. Perhaps this is a way for the Tramp to get off the streets for a night's shelter and maybe some food, as in the past. Or, it may be that already the Tramp has an eye toward a future life similar to one he has described to the Gamin. However, it is a moot point in the end. The Tramp lets the Gamin in the store after it closes, and they enjoy a fine meal, some recreation (featuring a blindfolded roller skating set piece by the Tramp, reminiscent of *The Rink* with an added degree of difficulty), and a night's sleep; the Gamin beds down in the bedroom display, wrapped in ermine,

while the Tramp goes about his job. But, three crooks - - who turn out to be unemployed, and hungry, fellow factory workers - - interrupt the Tramp's rounds. When they recognize him, they celebrate in the store's café, unfortunately with a bit too much vigor. The Gamin wakes up and escapes before the store opens, but the Tramp is discovered, passed out, in the ladies' linens. Again arrested, he is taken to jail, and his release precipitates the next sequence of the film's action.

Upon release, the Gamin is waiting for him, with a surprise: she has found them a home. It turns out to be the tumbledown shack, but they are both happy and content. The Tramp exclaims, "It's paradise!" just as a board falls and hits him on the head. The scene is an odd contrast to the "dream life" the Tramp had described before; as impossibly perfect as that vision one, this home is almost as impossibly rotted. But the couple seems just as happy, and perhaps even happier, because this is *real*, and instead of their dream reminding them of what they lack, this home comes (by way of the Gamin's off-screen ingenuity) with real food. But can they settle in any one place? In this film, and in the Tramp's world in general, is settling down even a possibility?

Again, instead of contemplating this question, the film presents another opportunity for work. The Tramp reads in the morning paper (just like in a real home) that the factory will reopen. He declares, with firm resolve, "Now we'll get a real home!" He thus sets off for the factory, where he manages to be the last man to squeeze through the gates and be hired. The Tramp serves as apprentice to a mechanic assigned to repair the "long-idle" machines. This presents the opportunity for another large scale set piece, this one with the mechanic being caught inside the machine, and just as his head pops out of an opening, the lunch bell closes down operations. Thus the Tramp offers to feed him his lunch, and the result are similarly unsuccessful as the Tramp

being fed *by* a machine earlier in the film (though the Tramp manages at least to serve the mechanic his tea by funneling it through the carcass of a roasted chicken). Finally, the lunch break ends, and just as the Tramp recovers his boss from the bowels of the machine, another worker comes to them with news: there is a strike (on the first day back to work, no less). Here Chaplin demonstrates a nice bit of pathos without sentiment: after the adversarial lunch, the Tramp and the mechanic look at each other with mutual sympathy and confusion: what will they do for work now?

As the Tramp leaves the factory, the police are out in force, moving the striking workers away from the site. The Tramp is pushed by a policeman, and responds by showing his indignation. This has always been an engaging feature of the Tramp character: as down at heel he is, he maintains his essential human dignity, sometime to comic effect in contrast with his situation, but always with the underlying message that every human has inherent worth. The idea recalls a remark of Bazin's: even though *Modern Times* is not in the Italian neorealist style (which had not yet occurred), the photography is the most realistic of all Chaplin's films to date, and the subject is treated in a realistic manner. Bazin's comment is certainly appropriate to Chaplin's film: "Is not neorealism primarily a kind of humanism and only secondarily a style of film-making? Then as to the style itself, is it not essentially a form of self-effacement before reality?"²¹ *Modern Times* does demonstrate Chaplin's humanism, if the film can be said to have any kind of overarching intent. Also, the film concerns itself with the Tramp's self-effacement before reality, and before society. Walter Kerr notes that in *City Lights* Chaplin confronted himself as an artist.²² In *Modern Times*, the Tramp confronts himself as an entity of the screen. Can he get along in a mechanized age? Chaplin, as well, is asking himself the same question about the Tramp.

The police continue to push workers away, and while leaving with obvious indignity regarding his treatment, the Tramp happens to step on a plank, propelling a brick onto the head of the policeman who pushed him, and once again the Tramp is arrested as a communist agitator. Rather than focus on the Tramp's life in jail, which is of less consequence in light of his relationship with the Gamin, the film follows the Gamin's adventures. She is again at the waterfront, and is seen dancing in the streets to the music of a merry-go-round by a café owner, who hires her to provide entertainment for his guests. This time when the Tramp is released, the Gamin is again waiting for him, but with a sharp new outfit, healthy and clean, and again with a surprise for the Tramp: she has secured him a job as a singing waiter. As mentioned before, the Gamin assures the owner that the Tramp can sing, much to his surprise. This represents a theme of the film rarely (if ever) considered: the fact of the choices the Tramp must make. The film may be seen as one in which the Tramp is faced with many choices, each affecting directly his life and the Gamin's. Before, the Tramp was given to more intuitive behavior when facing a dilemma. But *Modern Times* makes the effort to show the Tramp, and Chaplin, *considering* choices: does he run away with the Gamin or go back to jail?; or, does he go back to work, though he has always managed to get by as the Tramp?; and, does he attempt to sing when in fact he has never spoken on film? This is confrontation, for the answers to these questions (and certainly to the last one) will determine the existence of the Tramp.

The Tramp does, indeed, attempt the song, as discussed earlier. But why make the attempt at all? It is in this direction the Tramp's path lies; singing the song is what the Gamin wants, and will secure him a job, so that they may actually get a "real home." Chaplin, and the Tramp, have made their decisions, accordingly, all along. He does sing a song of sorts, though the pantomime

of the story communicates its meaning. The performance is a triumph, both for the Tramp and for Chaplin. Chaplin finally registers the Tramp's voice on film, though in a way that will remain distinctly the Tramp's. The crowd in the café love the Tramp's act, and he is guaranteed a job. But can self-effacement before reality be this easy?

Just as the Gamin goes out to perform her number, two juvenile officers apprehend her, intending to take her to the orphanage. But now the stakes are far too high; the Tramp cannot possibly let her be taken, just as he could not let the orphanage take the Kid away. The four of them struggle in the dressing room, and the Tramp and the girl manage, one more time, to get away. The next title, "Dawn," and the Tramp and the Gamin resting at roadside informs us that they have been walking all night. The Tramp nonchalantly cools his feet; he has been here before. But the Gamin has not, and starts to cry. She asks, "What's the use of trying?" To which the Tramp replies, "Buck up - - never say die! We'll get along!" The Tramp's undying optimism, and essential happiness, is a quality essential to the composition of the character. It is this, as much as anything, which affords the Tramp the ability to wander off his films at the end, leaving the audience feeling that he will get by, after all. Fittingly, this quality is required by Emerson for his representative poet:

One more royal trait belongs properly to the Poet, I mean his cheerfulness, without which no man can be a poet, for beauty is his aim. He loves virtue, not for its obligation, but for its grace: he delights in the world, in man, in woman, for the lovely light which sparkles from them. Beauty, the spirit of joy and hilarity, he sheds on the universe.²³

Reaffirmed by the Tramp, the girl gets up, and the two set off again. They approach the camera as they walk down the center of the road, and then stop. The Tramp pantomimes for her to smile. It takes a moment, but she does, and so does he - - perhaps in the greatest moment of satisfaction

we have seen from the Tramp. The camera reverses the shot, and shows the couple in a medium long shot, walking down the road, away from us. There is no iris out on the lonely Tramp; instead there is a very gradual fade to black as the music swells. The Tramp, indeed, is gone, but he isn't alone, and he does not disappear into the kind of ambiguity we have seen before. Just as the frame remains open, so do the possibilities for the Tramp, and the Gamin, seem endless and, in a sense, eternal.

Notes

1. Jean Bodon, "Introduction," André Bazin, *Essays on Chaplin*. Ed. and Trans. Jean Bodon (New Haven, CT: University of New Haven Press, 1985), xii.
2. André Bazin, *Essays on Chaplin*. Ed. and Trans. Jean Bodon (New Haven, CT: University of New Haven Press, 1985), 7.
3. Ibid.
4. Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 358.
5. David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life & Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 458-59.
6. "Charlot" is the name given to the little tramp by French critics.
7. Bazin, 6.
8. Robinson, 389.
9. Silent films were shot at a camera speed of sixteen frames per second; sound speed is twenty-four frames per second.
10. Robinson, 465.
11. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 148.
12. Robinson, 465.
13. Cavell, 150.
14. Ibid., 152-53.
15. Kerr, 355.
16. Previously, all trick and transition effects were done in the camera. An extraordinary example of this occurs in *The Gold Rush* when, during a hunger-induced hallucination, Big Jim thinks he sees the Tramp turn into a giant chicken, and then back into the Tramp. The quality of the transfiguration is flawless, and owes much to Roland Totheroh's great camera skills.
17. Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 303-04.
18. Kerr, 355.

19. Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, in *Comedy: George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy" and Henri Bergson, "Laughter."* Ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 80-81.
20. Kerr, 351-54.
21. André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 29.
22. Kerr, 344.
23. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Shakespeare, or the Poet," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson volume IV: Representative Men: Seven Lectures*. Ed. Douglas Emory Wilson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 123.

Conclusion

Adam in the Garden Again

Though Emerson's theories found literary disciples in Thoreau and Whitman, the most far-reaching extension of his aesthetic came with the development of the motion picture. In the early twentieth century, D. W. Griffith singlehandedly changed the status of films from sideshow amusements to narrative art. Griffith's techniques for creating visual narrative were intuitive and inspired from his imagination, an essential quality of the Emersonian poet. Griffith's own moral imperative was similar to Emerson's; he envisioned a medium which could educate more effectively than language.

In retrospect, it is a shame that D. W. Griffith did not live long enough to play the part of the big-time studio film director in Billy Wilder's 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard*. That the role went to Cecil B. DeMille is appropriate enough, since the film he is making in Wilder's picture is one of the sword-and-sandal epics of the type for which DeMille was well known. Perhaps DeMille was cast because he represented the bygone era of film in which the fictitious, faded star Norma Desmond had flourished. The role would have been cunning recognition for Griffith, not the least because he needed the work, which he certainly did toward the end of his life. The motion picture business he had invented had passed him by, and Wilder's film, which starred Gloria Swanson and Erich von Stroheim, and featured Buster Keaton, Hedda Hopper and Harry B. Warner, reminds us of the callousness of the motion picture industry and demonstrates a nation forgetful of its own past. Perhaps, though, Griffith could *not* have played the role, for he and Norma Desmond were in the same position: *they were* still big; it's the pictures that got smaller. By 1936, most of the directors, actors, and technicians who had worked under Griffith - - including John Ford, Raoul

Walsh, Tod Browning, W. S. Van Dyke, Mack Sennett, Erich von Stroheim, Donald Crisp, Cecil B. DeMille, Lionel Barrymore, W. C. Fields, Mary Pickford, Mabel Normand, Harry Carey, Walter Huston, Walter Wanger, Jesse Lasky - - had long since moved to the vertically integrated, big-business Hollywood of the Studio Era. Griffith made his last film, *The Struggle*, in 1931; the film proved a terrible failure. Griffith died, alone, a motion picture relic, in 1948. Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* is a eulogy for the tragedies of that era. How fitting it would have been if, when Norma Desmond comes down that grand staircase one last time and announces, "I'm ready for my close up," D. W. Griffith - - the man credited with the creative, definitive implementation of that technique - - could have been the director to shoot it.

In his 1850 book of essays *Representative Men*, Emerson wrote that "the world still wants its poet-priest." Charles Chaplin died in his sleep on December 25, 1977. Tributes began to sound from all parts of the world. Significantly, Federico Fellini observed that Chaplin was "a sort of Adam, from whom we are all descended . . . There were two aspects of his personality; the vagabond, but also the solitary aristocrat, the prophet, the priest, and the poet."¹ Perhaps Fellini recognized a quality in Chaplin that Emerson longed for; it seems reasonable to assume, from his writings, that Emerson would have recognized Chaplin as a poet. Emerson states, in "Poetry and Imagination," a quality of the poet that Chaplin inhabited: "For poetry is faith. To the poet the world is virgin soil; all is practicable; the men are ready for virtue; it is always time to do right. He is a true re-commencer, or Adam in the garden again."²

Notes

1. David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life & Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 632.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition, volume VIII: Letters and Social Aims*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 31.

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